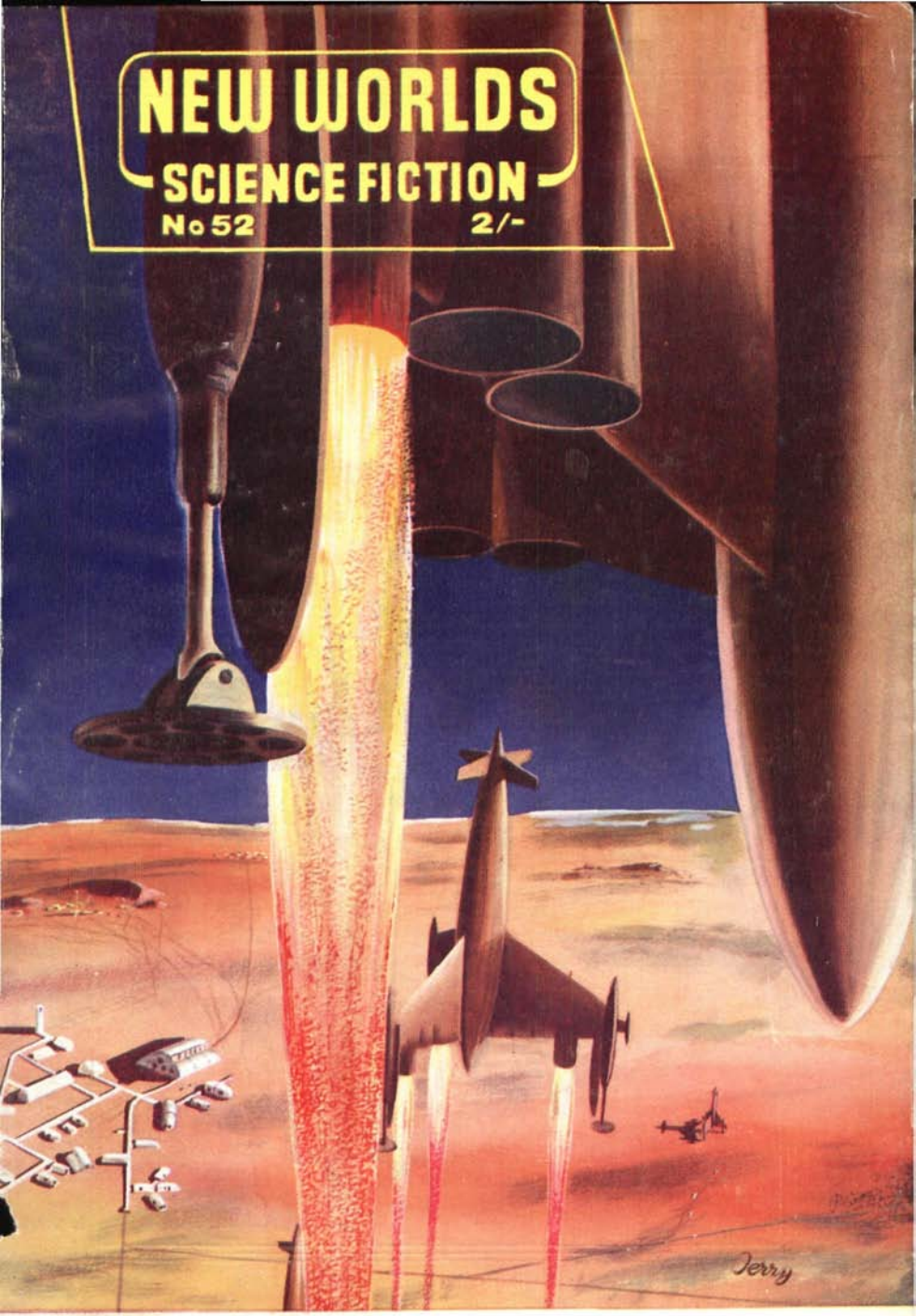

New Serial : TOURIST PLANET by James White

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James White

Belfast

Whose first novel-length story commences in serial form in this issue is one of the brightest rising stars among our younger authors, having had most of his short stories published in this magazine. In between working as assistant manager of a large tailoring firm in Belfast and writing science fiction he recently managed to get married to a tall willowy blonde daughter of the Emerald Isle — so we can expect his writing technique to go on improving.

Concerning *Tourist Planet* he says, "This grew from a scene in a film encountered two years ago. The plot was that of two thousand G.I's on a Pacific Island with no women there except the Colonel's beautiful daughter (it was *not* called "Thousands Drool"). It was a poor picture saved only by some incredibly beautiful shots of palm trees against a sunset sky. I thought then, and still do, that the wild and alien beauty of far-off planets will have a tough job competing with what we have right here on Earth.

"Part of this story was written by the light of a candle jammed in a lemonade bottle, due to a power strike; and I now have the greatest admiration for those mediaeval authors who scratched out their works beneath flickering tapers — even with aspirin the eyestrain gave me a headache which lasted for days."

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IT'S LONDON IN '57 !

The Biltmore Hotel, New York, Sept. 3rd

In the palatial 19th-floor ballroom of this hotel before a packed audience of science fiction enthusiasts gathered from all parts of the United States, plus several from Canada and England, voting for the 1957 World Science Fiction Convention site has just been concluded, and before the tense audience Chairman David A. Kyle of New York City has informed them that by the overwhelming majority of 203 votes to 65 London has outbidden Oakland, California for the honour of having next year's Convention.

While this had been anticipated in England and a substantial Committee formed some months before I left London for New York to make the bid on behalf of Great Britain, nobody until this moment could be quite sure how the majority of Americans would take to the idea of their own "World" Convention being held outside United States territorial waters. In fact, at a business session held earlier today, there were some lively debated scenes, held in true American style reminiscent of scenes in the Senate, with author L. Sprague de Camp presiding.

Unlike any British Convention, I found that considerable lobbying was being done both for and against London and as the day wore on it became evident that an exciting fight would develop between those who wanted the Convention to stay in their own country and those who recognised that science fiction had become international and that recognition should now be given to the many countries outside the United States who had become active in our own particular field of interest.

At 3.00 p.m. this afternoon Anthony Boucher, editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* rose to make the opening bid for Oakland and in a very fine speech explained their city's plans for next year should they be successful. Several prominent West Coasters then added seconding speeches, being allowed ten minutes in which to make their tributes in favour of the Oakland-Berkeley area of California. The opening bid for London then followed by myself and was seconded by Larry Shaw, editor of *Infinity Science Fiction* who attended our own Kettering Convention earlier this year. Short supporting speeches in favour of London were then made by authors Dr. E. E. Smith of "Lensman" series fame and Richard Wilson who had also been at Kettering this year. Some thirty minutes later the result in favour of London was announced.

London can now go ahead with preparations for the first truly *World* Science Fiction Convention, tentatively booked for September 6th, 7th and 8th at the Royal Hotel in Bloomsbury. This will

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be held under the auspices of the World Science Fiction Society, Inc., a body specially formed in Cleveland last year to handle these national meetings. At that time provision was made in the Society's by-laws to allow a World Convention to be held outside the United States and it is axiomatic of the democratic method used by the Society that the delegates present voted the site to Europe.

Regarding the Convention itself, now coming to a close after four exciting days of amateur and professional interest, opinions are divided as to how successful it was. It was certainly the largest ever held in the world—over 1,200 delegates registering throughout the period. However, as with all such large affairs it was always difficult to closely control the programme or meet all the celebrities present.

Guest of Honour here was our own Arthur C. Clarke, who was enthusiastically received, the entire audience rising to its feet and applauding for many minutes at the termination of his 30-minute speech following the banquet on Sunday night. At this glittering festive board he was ably supported by American cartoonist Al Capp of "Li'l Abner" fame, author Isaac Asimov, and Master of Ceremonies Robert Bloch, the three of them putting over fast-paced speeches packed with wit and humour which kept the audience in a constant state of laughter. People who did not attend the banquet were allowed on to the balcony overlooking the dining hall to hear this outstanding comedy show.

On Saturday evening eleven publishing houses invited everyone to a cocktail party where they were able to meet all the celebrities present—professionals whose names are internationally known—authors by the score, all the leading magazine editors, artists, and publishers; so many, in fact, that it is not possible to record their names here. The most pleasant surprise, however, was the number of "old-time" celebrities who turned up—people like Frank R. Paul the artist and author Ray Cummings, famous for his fantasy stories for the past 30 years.

Delegates went straight from the cocktail party into the ballroom where there was dancing until midnight when judging of the masquerade dresses took place. Nearly 100 delegates in futuristic costumes took part in the Grand March, the scope and ingenuity of which must have taken some of them months to prepare. Numerous prizes were given to the winners in the different classes—the entire ballroom looking like a fantastic nightmare from a Kelly Freas dream.

This year's Achievement Awards were balloted for on Sunday afternoon prior to the 1957 Convention Site voting. The trophies themselves are beautifully futuristic model spaceships mounted on

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polished wood and inscribed with the winner's name—somewhat similar to the International Fantasy Awards donated in London each year for the best novel—but cover numerous categories, there being a trophy for each section.

Winning novelist was Robert A. Heinlein for his story *Double Star,* serialised in *Astounding Science Fiction* and published as a book by Doubleday; the best novelette was awarded to Murray Leinster for "Exploration Team"; Arthur Clarke won the short story award with his "The Star"; feature writers honoured were Willy Ley with L. Sprague de Camp in second place; John W. Campbell, Jr. once again took the trophy for the best magazine of the year—*Astounding;* artists honoured this year were Kelly Freas in first place with Ed Emsh and Chesley Bonestell as runners-up; Bob Silverberg was voted the most promising author of the year and duly rewarded with a handsome trophy, while for book reviewing Damon Knight took the first place with P. Schuyler Miller in second. In the amateur category fan magazines were honoured when Ron and Cindy Smith won an award for their excellently produced magazine entitled *Inside.*

Throughout the three official days of the Convention there has been a wide variety of interesting sessions, including panel shows and quizzing the experts, an amateur film entitled "Longer Than You Think," produced and acted by members of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, a brilliant ballet produced by Ruth Massey and under the direction of Olga Ley, a sight-seeing tour by boat round Manhattan Island, innumerable auctions of rare MSS, art work, books and magazines, and concluding later tonight with an exclusive opening night performance at the Provincetown Playhouse of Karel Capek's play "The Makropoulos Secret."

Convention attendees' first glimpse of the main halls came immediately after they had registered, passing into a large room crammed with interesting displays and exhibits including a large display of the "Viking" guided missile by the US Air Force and a fascinating electrical guessing game entitled "Out Of This World" put on by the publishers of *Amazing Stories.* The display room was one of the most interesting science fiction spectacles I have ever seen although the heat which has swept through the sky-scraper canyons has been almost unbearable—New York having welcomed me with a minor heat wave which followed in the wake of "Hurricane Betsy."

From the programme viewpoint few delegates could have had much cause for complaint as there has been something interesting going on the whole time. After midnight there have been numerous parties going on, spread out on varying levels between the 4th and 22nd floors and many fans have been on an autograph hunting spree to catch their favourite authors in a more relaxed mood.

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Despite the apparent success of the Convention, however, something has appeared to be missing. Perhaps the vastness of the undertaking has had a little to do with minor disappointments—everyone had expected this to be The Big One as it is referred to here, for not since 1937 has New York had the World Science Fiction Convention, when in that year they organised the first one. Each year since then, with the exceptions of 1942 and 1943, American Conventions have gained in size, prestige and experience—Chicago in 1953 being the largest until now, when nearly 1,000 people attended. However, it would seem that to a large extent the personal touch is lost when attendance runs over 500 people or so—I have met people for the first time today who have been here all the time: we were just never in the same place at the same time.

Whatever recriminations arise—and the heat will undoubtedly produce some—no-one can deny that it has been a great meeting for old and new friends and socially it must have been the most outstanding science fiction event to date. Late tonight, as I write this, after the final official session has finished and the exhibits dismantled and the 12ft. "World Science Fiction Society" banner in blue and white is furled ready to send on its way to London, there will be a continuous film show in colour of scenes from many previous Conventions. All the major events this year have been covered in film and the sound tape-recorded and it may be possible for all these to be shown next year for the benefit of the many European delegates who will be visiting London and who will no doubt find an interesting comparison between British and American type Conventions.

Already, as I write this, discussions have been held in the hotel between the present Convention Committee and representatives of Pan American Airways to charter one or two 70-seater planes to take American delegates across the Atlantic in 1957. While London cannot expect to compete in overall numbers they will at least have adequate support from many American authors and fans—and those guests will receive a "Royal" welcome.

As to who will be London's Guest of Honour next year only time will tell, but the London Committee have already compiled a list of possible celebrities from whom we may expect at least one more to be present. An air letter I received this morning informs me that author John Wyndham has accepted the position of President of the Committee Council now at work planning the skeleton of next year's Convention.

Already it looks as though London will be truly representative of a "World" Science Convention.

John Carnell

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TOURIST PLANET

It is a great pleasure to be able to offer for your reading enjoyment James White's first novel-length story as a three-part serial. We particularly like the manner in which he has contrived each instalment, making it practically impossible for you to guess what is coming next. So let us start with the 'dying grandfathers' and some considerable mystery amongst the Security organisations of the world.

By James White

Illustrated by QUINN

Part One of Three Parts

I

The sunset was unbelievable, an explosion of colour so breathtaking that its sheer resplendence seemed somehow to be in questionable taste. It was a shade too beautiful, Lockhart thought. Bathed in that amber flood of light, the evening strollers along the boulevard Saint-Michel were transformed into actors in some colourful, romantic drama instead of the drably commonplace characters that the majority of them were. Almost, it brought warmth to the face of the old man who was dying at the café table across the street.

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Lockhart's eyes rested on the old man only long enough to be sure that he was still alive, then he shifted them back to the crowd, the sunset, and to the car containing three of Hedley's men which was parked further along the street. The thought returned then of what he was here to do, and the sunset abruptly lost its appeal ; the pulsing bands of fire filling the western sky became nothing more than an interesting group of meteorological phenomena which gave strong indications of rain before morning.

A sharp intake of breath made Lockhart look quickly at the man sharing the café table with him. Hedley was staring anxiously across the street and Lockhart saw the cause of the agent's anxiety at once. Two people were trying to talk to the old man.

The girl looked vaguely Spanish—dark complexion with that peculiar combination of thin, aristocratic nose and wide, full lips. Her hair was dark brown or black, and her figure was attracting the appreciative gaze of a passing group of students. Her companion was a small, thin-faced man whose clothing seemed to indicate a certain degree of effeminacy ; he was pretty rather than handsome. They were bending over the old man and the girl was apparently asking a question. After a pause she repeated it, louder.

Why, thought Lockhart suddenly, I *know* that girl !

" What's she saying ?" Hedley said, holding his voice to a conversational level with difficulty. " What language is it, at least ?"

Lockhart shook his head. " She's too far away to tell," he replied. " But I know her—she isn't anyone you're looking for."

Hedley made an annoyed sound. " I'll be the judge of that. How long have you known her ?"

" I saw her last night at a concert," Lockhart said. " We didn't speak." He paused awkwardly, thinking of how this would sound to Hedley, then went on. " It's rather complicated, but I know she isn't the type to be mixed up in this. You see—"

" This is the first time," Hedley cut in, " that one of these old men has been contacted by someone who might be an enemy agent. Maybe they are just a couple of kind-hearted types who think he's sick and want to help, but again, maybe they are nothing of the sort." He exhaled irritably. " So, despite your unsolicited testimonial, Doctor, I'll have them followed."

He took a handkerchief from his breast pocket, shook it out twice and blew his nose. A hundred yards away one of his men got out of the waiting car and merged with the crowd. The couple across the street had unknowingly acquired a shadow, and Lockhart, who was firmly convinced that the agent was wasting his time, kept angrily silent.

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Usually Lockhart was not so touchy about things, but Hedley—and the job the agent wanted him to do—had kept him on edge all day.

Prior to that morning, Lockhart had not seen Hedley since the time during the closing months of the war when an air ambulance had set him down, literally, on the hospital's front lawn. Lockhart had been attached to a south coast Bomber Group at the time, doing his best to repair partially wrecked men so that they could go back to wrecking more aircraft. Hedley had kept him busy that day and most of the following night, he remembered.

The holes in Hedley's legs and side were flesh wounds and not in themselves dangerous, but from his condition upon arrival Lockhart guessed that he must have crawled through about a mile of mud before they had been dressed. With the antibiotics he had been given battling the infection raging through his system, it was no surprise that the patient had been delirious. Consequently, Lockhart had found out a lot he wasn't supposed to know.

Hedley was an Intelligence officer. That, in itself, would not have made Lockhart uncomfortable. What did so was the large number of high-ranking officers who congregated around Hedley's bed, listening to his every mumbled word, and who hung around in relays until the patient had passed out of danger and been transferred somewhere else. Hedley, it seemed, had been an important man.

Before leaving, however, the agent had thanked him, shaken hands, and advised him to keep quiet about anything he may have heard until such times as he was writing his memoirs.

Lockhart had kept quiet long after the need for secrecy was gone—not, he suspected, because he was a close-mouthed type, but simply because Hedley had requested it of him. When Hedley asked, refusal was virtually impossible, and when he ordered something done, Lockhart was sure that it became nothing less than an entry in the pages of future history. With a feeling almost of awe, Lockhart remembered how Hedley had, within ten minutes of meeting him, talked him into accepting a rather unpleasant task. A task, moreover, which could leave him open to grave charges of unethical practice.

Was he a doctor, Lockhart asked himself suddenly, *or a ghoul . . .*?

Simply, Hedley wanted the old man across the street watched until, in Lockhart's opinion, he was at the point of death. Only then could the fast-acting poison, which had made previous attempts at questioning these people impossible, be removed, thus allowing the agent a chance to obtain some desperately needed information.

Something was afoot, Hedley had told him ; something big, dirty, and the worst threat to peace since the invasion of Poland. The agent

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had been so deadly serious about the matter that he had been positively frightening. And though Lockhart had agreed to help, he could not quite see how this white-haired old man—and the others like him that Hedley had mentioned—could be a threat to anything.

Lockhart's train of thought came to a sudden stop as the couple across the street straightened and began to move away. For an instant, Lockhart thought that the girl's face showed something like disappointment, but the fading light made it difficult to read features with any degree of accuracy. And when he brought his attention back to the old man, he felt his mouth going dry.

The old man's features had gone suddenly slack, and the eyes had closed. Despite the ruddy glow from that spectacular sunset his face was still and chalk white. Lockhart wet his lips. When he spoke he hardly recognised his own voice.

"Uh . . . Now, I think," he said.

Without speaking, Hedley slid two black leather bags from under their table and pushed the one containing the medical kit towards Lockhart. They rose and crossed the street quickly. Lockhart knew what he had to do, but for a moment he hesitated.

There was a strange dignity about the lined and wrinkled countenance, an aura of power and keen intelligence now long gone. The steady breakdown in the life processes was rapidly wiping all expression and character from the face, but enough remained for Lockhart to know that he would have liked this man. He had a feeling which affected him in cases of this kind—an overwhelming respect, and pity, and love of the aged. Maybe he should have specialised in Geriatrics. But he felt that any indignity to which he might subject this old man would be nothing less than a moral offence, like disordering the bones of a dead saint.

"*Hurry* !" Hedley whispered fiercely.

The agent had his bag open. He was lifting out what a lay observer might have mistaken for a sphygmomanometer—though the same observer would have referred to it out of self defence as 'the thing doctors used to take blood pressure.' Actually it was a heavily disguised and very sensitive tape-recorder. Hedley set it going and moved it closer to the old man, then left to intercept the café proprietor who was bearing down on them.

Callously, efficiently, Lockhart's hands went to work. The emotional and untrustworthy sector of his brain was cut off, isolated—especially from control of his hands.

He forced the mouth open, wide. He tested the teeth ; they were all good—which surprised him—and they rang solid. Carefully he

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scrutinised the inside of the mouth ; empty. He examined the gums again, and raised the tongue ; still nothing. Where was the thing ?

A gendarme had now joined Hedley and the café proprietor. In faultless French, the agent was gravely taking them into his confidence about the distressing condition of the old gentleman whose life his colleague was striving so gallantly to save. With the proper amount of respect due to one authority from another in a different though doubtless equally important field, Hedley appealed for the gendarme's aid in the struggle. He was most eloquent. The gendarme, obviously feeling about seven feet tall and broad in proportion, moved importantly onto the pavement to disperse the crowd which was beginning to gather.

Lockhart badly needed advice on other possible methods of concealing poison, but the café proprietor was keeping Hedley busy with morbid questions regarding things medical. He gritted his teeth. Time was running out. The old man's life expectancy could be measured now in minutes, perhaps seconds. Prising open the unresisting jaw, Lockhart had another look. Suddenly he saw it.

It had been a flat, lozenge-shaped capsule of some gelatanous substance moulded around a few drops of greyish liquid. Body heat and saliva had dissolved the capsule to wafer thinness, except where the liquid made a tiny bulge in its centre. Lockhart had mistaken it at first for a small mouth ulcer. Now he knew it for what it was, but he still had to get it out. While it remained, the slightest pressure of the old man's tongue would burst it, and Hedley would be looking elsewhere for his information.

The partly melted capsule was fragile, slippery, and it adhered far back on the roof of the mouth. Carefully, so as not to nip through it and allow the highly lethal contents to trickle down the old man's throat, Lockhart began to slide it forward. Sweat broke on him as his probing instrument pressed briefly behind the tongue, causing involuntary, retching contractions of the throat, and he nearly lost it. But finally he had it between his fingers, then out.

Without giving his mind time to dwell on how close a thing it had been, he set about the second half of the job.

The shots were already prepared. He injected heart stimulants, then broke the seal of a small tube of compressed oxygen and let the gas play briefly over the open mouth and nostrils. When he came to the point where the pentothal-derivative, which was popularly referred to as ' Truth Drug,' was being administered, the old man was conscious enough to wince. Lockhart listened intently to the sucking, creaking and rumbling noises of that worn-out heart being forced into renewed

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activity. Like a faulty engine with cracked cylinders and no lubrication, he thought sadly ; it could be made to work, but not for long.

" Hedley !" he called sharply. When the agent joined him, he whispered, " Be quick. You've got about ten minutes."

" What is your name ?" Hedley said, softly but distinctly into the old man's ear. " Where do you come from ?"

Hedley's face, for the benefit of onlookers, showed the proper mixture of gravity and clinical detachment, but his knuckles where they gripped the chair shone white. He repeated the question, in French and German and Russian.

The old man's head rolled from side to side, as if he was trying to avoid something. He looked puzzled and vaguely frightened. Suddenly he said, " Hargon " followed by something which sounded like " Vitlim."

Hedley tried again : " Why are you here ? "

The answer was mumbled gibberish.

" Delirium," Lockhart diagnosed. " Probably caused by interruption of blood-flow to the brain, or simply advanced senility."

" Then why can't he rave in English so's we would have some idea—"

For an instant the hard-held mask of Hedley's face slipped, and his jaw dropped open. The old man was no longer raving.

" I mus' speak English," he mumbled slowly, " and think in English. Even among the . . . the . . ." His voice wavered, and his head seemed all at once too heavy for him to hold up. Quickly, Lockhart measured out another dose, then slowly replaced the syringe without using it. He tapped Hedley's arm.

" No more questions, I'm afraid," he said gently.

Hedley sighed and straightened up. " He didn't tell us much," he said bitterly. " Unless—" He tapped the recorder lightly. "—we can unravel the gibberish in here."

Lockhart's mind was suddenly seething with questions, for the agent had told him practically nothing.

" Why," he burst out, " was he *sucking* that capsule ? Could he have known we were watching him, or did he mean to commit suicide anyway, not realising that he was dying ? "

Hedley looked up and down the cool, tree-lined avenue, at the crowds, and at the conflagration raging across the western sky. Everything—even to an orange peel lying in the gutter—held a sharp intensity of colouring that made the scene resemble an over-vivid painting rather than mundane reality. When he spoke he seemed almost to be talking to himself.

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"He picked a good time for it," the agent said softly. "This is nice. Much better than dying in bed . . ." He trailed off into silence, then turned abruptly and waved to the waiting car.

As Hedley and the gendarme helped him lift the old man into the car, Lockhart thought of his manner of dying. His waiting, as Hedley had so uncharacteristically put it, until the nicest time of the day to do it. The thought made him uncomfortable, as if he were missing something.

What sort of enemy agent would do a thing like that?

II

The car picked up speed along the boulevard Saint-Michel and swung left into Saint-Germain. At the Pont Sully they bore left again, and holding to the Quais along the left bank of the river, sped in the general direction of Ivry. Since leaving the café nobody in the car had spoken.

Hedley and Lockhart rode in the back, supporting the limp body of the old man between them. As the silence dragged on, his curiosity regarding the events of the evening mounted. The agent had told him practically nothing, beyond giving very detailed instructions regarding procedure, and now he was feeling increasingly uneasy about the help he had given to the other. Had that assistance been a mistake?

The agent had spoken darkly of a threat to world peace, but for the life of him Lockhart could not see how the old man fitted into the conspiracy. For one thing, he had been too old to act effectively as a spy or saboteur. And yet, he'd been carrying a capsule which—according to Hedley—caused death in seconds. That surely was not the act of a completely innocent man.

Why had Hedley not told him more? But he knew the answer without having to ask; classified information. Finally Lockhart could stand the silence no longer.

"Where are you taking him?" he asked, and the angry harshness of his voice surprised him. More softly, he added, "If you're allowed to tell me, that is."

Hedley sighed, and the seat springs creaked faintly as he shifted position. "Saint Armande's," he said. "It's a military hospital." Briefly he busied himself with pulling across the rear window curtain, then added, "They're used to this sort of thing now."

"You mean the authorities know about this?"

"Officially, no," Hedley answered. "But unofficially, they know and are just as scared as we are. It was the Sûreté here, while conducting a purely routine investigation, who first became suspicious of 'the grandfathers' as they called them, and we knew nothing about it until—"

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"Wait. Wait," Lockhart said hastily. The knowledge that his action had been more or less sanctioned by the French authorities relieved his mind considerably, but if anything it increased his bewilderment. That old man had been a threat to nobody. What could the authorities be afraid of? What was Hedley and his own government afraid of?

Suddenly he realised that he had no idea of the extent of this . . . threat. He had better find out before he jumped to conclusions.

"Just how many of these old men are there?"

"I don't know," Hedley said, and stopped. He looked at Lockhart speculatively, then visibly coming to a decision, continued, "I can tell you how many have killed themselves, however—and as we know so very little about them, I think that it would be stupid to be needlessly secretive about data which is a complete mystery even to ourselves . . ."

I don't like this, Lockhart thought suddenly. *He's telling me too much.* If the normally close-mouthed Hedley was giving out information, then there was a reason for it. The reason, Lockhart suspected, was probably another job.

". . . The *gendarmerie*, by their simple, direct methods, lost seven," Hedley was saying. "The Sûreté, with considerable more subtlty, lost five before they got scared and called in military intelligence—who to date have lost fourteen. I have lost two, and one . . ." He nodded towards the figure lolling between them. ". . . that I don't consider to be a loss at all.

"Some of the methods of questioning were ingenious," the agent continued. "They even tried the psychological approach—making friends and then getting them to talk about themselves. But 'the grandfathers' didn't give anything away, and when the agent doing the pumping became impatient and began asking leading questions . . ." Hedley snapped his fingers. ". . . he had a dead man on his hands.

"They tried knocking them out—with drugs, anaesthetic gas and even with brute force—in order to get that capsule away. No good. They invariably foiled the attempts to capture or question them." Grimly, Hedley ended, "They're conditioned, apparently, to kill themselves rather than answer questions, and with one exception, they've done just that."

So nearly thirty 'grandfathers' had died rather than answer the simplest questions about themselves! And Hedley's manner implied that there were more who had not died, simply because they had not yet been questioned. But *why*? What tremendous secret could they possess that they . . .

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Baffled, Lockhart gave up. He could make no sense of it at all, and slowly, as his sub-conscious worried vainly at the problem, puzzlement became uneasiness, and quite suddenly Lockhart knew that he was afraid. He looked quickly at Hedley.

The agent was a big man, with large features held together by loosely-connected slabs and ridges of muscle. The face could register any emotion to order, and at the moment it showed nothing—and was working very hard to do it. Hedley also was afraid.

More to quiet his own fears than from a desire to say anything constructive, Lockhart said, "You say they are all old men, What do you fear from them? Sabotage? Or subversion?"

"They are not ordinary agents or subversives," the agent replied. "They have been under close surveillance, and so far they've contacted nobody suspicious, posted no letters, and from the few words they've addressed to hotel people and such, their politics are pure to the point of non-existence. They appear neither to seek or to avoid meetings with each other, and they do nothing but sit around in parks, or go to shows and concerts, or maybe for a ride on the riverboats. If it wasn't for just two things, we'd treat them as the harmless old codgers that they appear to be, and forget them."

The car swung sharply left. Lockhart saw that they had left the river bank, but the locality was unfamiliar to him. He returned his attention to Hedley.

"One," the agent continued, "we know nothing whatever about their place of origin. This despite the fact that the birth records and police files of practically every country in the world have been placed at our disposal." A decidedly sour note tinged his voice. "So far as we know, they've never even been born.

"And two: they discourage curiosity regarding themselves in a most simple and devastatingly effective manner, they commit suicide."

A cold hand seemed to caress the short hair at the back of his neck, and that curious blend of fear and fascination with which Lockhart used to listen to the grown-ups telling ghost stories returned to him across the years. But his fear now was not of phantoms. He was beginning to understand the deadly seriousness of the agent in this business, and the urgency with which the other had pressed him into service. Where Hedley was concerned, a war was already in its opening stages. He asked suddenly:

"Does one have to ask which countries *didn't* open their records for your inspection?"

"No," Hedley said. "You know which one already."

Lockhart had to clench his teeth to keep from cursing aloud. What was wrong with people? Why did they do it? For the past decade

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the world had been in a state of uneasy peace—a peace forced on it because of the impossibility of any single nation going to war and showing a profit from it afterwards. But during the past year there had been signs that the peace was becoming less uneasy ; talks, conferences and goodwill visits were occurring more frequently. And now it seemed that it had all been a sham, a cloak to hide the dagger soon to be driven into some defenceless back . . .

But, Lockhart asked himself suddenly, why was he blowing his emotional top like this ? There was no proof that ' the grandfathers ' were acting in the interests of any nation. They were a mystery, true, but their age alone made them incapable of doing any harm. With an abrupt reversal of feeling, Lockhart began to burn with shame at his earlier fears and suspicions. The puzzle, he thought confidently, would have a simple, innocuous solution—' the grandfathers ' probably turning out to be a cult of some sort.

Hedley would not need his help for long, and he could go back and take that post he had been offered in London. Lockhart was doing little more than waste time here, he knew, on the excuse that he was catching up on theory. Some honest work would do him good, and incidently, help him forget the scare Hedley had thrown into him with his mysterious old men.

Not for a moment did Lockhart admit that he was adopting the defensive tactics of an ostrich.

At the other side of the car, Hedley cleared his throat gently.

" We've had the idea of waiting to the last minute before questioning these old men before," he said thoughtfully. " But this is the first time it has worked. Previously, the doctors helping us either waited too long, or jumped the gun before the old men were too far gone not to kill themselves. On the other hand, you seemed to know exactly when to act."

It was impossible to tell whether the agent was understating a deserved compliment, or subtly applying the soft soap. Lockhart was uncertain which it was, but he was resigned to the fact that Hedley would want something done, and it would be very hard indeed to avoid doing it.

" From the speech record we obtained," Hedley went on, " I hope to identify their country of origin. But further proof from other . . . er, specimens may be necessary. Will you continue to assist us, Doctor ? You realise, I know, how important this may be."

Lockhart sighed. " I'll help, of course," he said.

" Good !" Hedley said warmly. " You see, the authorities here thought up some pretty wild theories to explain the behaviour of the old men, and the reason for that peculiar poison being used—for a reason I'll explain in a moment, it has not yet been analysed, but we

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do know that it greatly hastens the processes of decomposition in the body containing it. They thought that its chief purpose might be the removal or neutralisation of some hypothetical substance whose presence in the old men's systems might give their equally hypothetical game away.

"This theorising has led to the point where the authorities have scared themselves silly. Even if their deductions are correct, I still don't think it necessary to cremate every specimen they found—"

"Cremate!" Lockhart burst out. "But why—"

He broke off as the car swerved sharply. He had a glimpse of a gatehouse, then flying gravel was rattling off the car's undersides as the brakes slid it to a halt in the driveway. Two soldiers, steel-helmeted and pointing sten guns, blocked their passage. A third approached the car.

Cremated, Lockhart thought wildly; burned to ashes. What were the French authorities so afraid of that they had done that? He felt his earlier self-confidence melting away. *Why burn them?*

The soldier put his head into the car, looked closely at the faces of Hedley's men in the front seat, then switched his attention to the back. He touched the edge of his white-painted helmet to Hedley in salute, and withdrew hurriedly. The car rolled forward again.

"Yes," Hedley went on, disregarding the interruption. "They are convinced that this poison is supposed either to obliterate all traces of or to set off some obscure chemical reaction within the old men's bodies. In short, they think that these old people are nothing less than walking bacteriological bombs, perhaps already primed.

"You can see, therefore, the importance of our friend here who died naturally, and the reason why I'd like you to perform an autopsy on him as quickly as possible."

Lockhart didn't reply. He had just become aware of how small the car was. The farthest he could get from the dead man beside him was two inches.

III

Lockhart was familiar with the aseptic and antiseptic techniques carried out during work in the theatre, but those precautions did not normally apply in the case of an autopsy. In the large, white-tiled dissecting room of St. Armande's hospital, however, those techniques were applied with such fantastic thoroughness that the memory of it made him shiver.

The plastic coveralls with their sealed, transparent cowls and self-contained air supply had not handicapped him too much—at least,

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not until he began using the microscope. Neither had the orderlies who, similarly equipped and armed with powerful disinfectant sprays, had wandered about the room spraying everything and everybody within reach. No, the thing which had bothered him at first was the four grim figures who had stood around the table, and with their eyes glued to the Army doctor who had been assisting him.

They had not used their sprays at all, for which fact Lockhart was very, very glad.

He had seen something like those heavy, wide-mouthed sprays before in an old news-reel. The picture had not been clear enough to make identification positive, but Lockhart would not have taken any bets that they had not been Army issue flame-throwers.

" If anything occurs, Doctor," Gerarde, the army man had remarked at one point, " we are all assured of medals."

What Dr. Gerarde had meant was that if the old man's body had turned suddenly green, or begun to sprout fungus, or in some less spectacular manner indicated that the bacteriacides in use were not controlling the spread of infection, then the men with the flame-throwers would take over and the area would be very effectively sterilised.

And it would have been the whole area, Lockhart knew, because the room had only one door, which had been barred from the outside, and no other openings.

But strangely, as the autopsy proceeded, his earlier fear of contamination from the old man faded. He had stopped wondering at the dirty trick fate had played upon him to land him in his present mess, and he had even forgotten—for whole minutes at a time—that he could at any instant have been whiffed out of existence, all too literally in a blaze of glory. There were things about that old man's body which had forced such trivia into the background.

If only St. Armande's had been a bigger and better equipped hospital, Lockhart thought in angry frustration. Or if he had been a half way decent pathologist maybe he could have managed something. Instead he had been forced to stop on the very verge of a discovery which would have set the entire medical profession on its collective ear.

The old man, either alive or dead, was harmless. Even Gerarde had been finally convinced of that. But Lockhart now, as well as Hedley, desperately wanted to know who the old man had been and where he had come from—and much more important, where was the doctor whose patient he had been ? He left Dr. Gerarde explaining to his assistants that this particalar corpse was not to be cremated, but had to be kept for a further and more detailed examination, and headed for the main hospital building. He badly wanted to talk to Hedley.

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Hedley was no longer in the hospital, and the personnel of whom Lockhart made his enquiries seemed strangely non-co-operative, almost hostile, towards him. This was in striking contrast with his reception on arrival five hours ago, and it puzzled him. Eventually he found the driver of the car which had brought them to the hospital, an agent called Gates, and out of sympathy for the other's shorthand made his report as non-technical as possible.

When he had finished, Gates stared thoughtfully through a window beside him which looked out on the squat, two-storey building in whose basement Lockhart had so recently been at work. A few ground floor windows were lighted, but intervening foliage made it impossible to see what was going on inside. He turned to regard Lockhart again.

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" Then you are convinced, Doctor," he said quietly, " that he was not the carrier of any conceivable type of bacteriological weapon, and we have nothing of that nature to fear ?".

" Correct," said Lockhart. He added, " The capsule, though we were unable to analyse it with the equipment available, contained a poison only, and not a germ-culture suspension."

" And these . . . er, abnormalities you spoke of ?"

" They were visually undetectable," Lockhart answered. " There were some slight differences in bone arrangement, a few other physiological short-cuts, and the complete absence of anything resembling a vermiform appendix. He was, I am convinced, a mutation of an unusually beneficial type, an example of what some geneticists think the human race may become some centuries hence.

" But it is the treatment which the old man has undergone in his past which has aroused my curiosity . . . "

Curiosity ! Was a beggar curious about a wad of bank-notes within his reach, Lockhart thought angrily, or a condemned prisoner merely curious about the last-minute arrival of his reprieve ? The feeling was much, much greater than those.

" You see," Lockhart went on, " when a man dies of old age, it can be attributed to the malfunctioning of several organs. It is a process of gradual running down, of wearing out, until the end comes relatively suddenly with the failure of one major organ—a stroke, a cardiac condition, or perhaps a cancer. The point I'm trying to stress is that although the breakdown is general, one certain organ always goes first. With this old man it was different, *he*, literally, went to pieces all at once."

Lockhart took a deep breath and continued :

" My theory is that he had been under treatment by an endocrinologist, a man who, by administering the proper hormones and antibiotics, maintained the glandular controls of his system in balance and kept it free from infection. This treatment, which to all intents and purposes halted the ageing process, had been stopped for some reason. The result of this was that the artificially maintained balance broke down, and widespread degeneration in the system followed fairly quickly. Something of this nature must, I am sure, be the explanation for the condition of the body.

" Also in the corpse I discovered traces, very minute, of a substance which acts against cholesterol in a way that puts our hormone and vitamin B treatments in the bread poultice class. Cholesterol," Lockhart explained quickly, " is a gummy deposit on the inner walls of the blood vessels which eventually causes hardening of the arteries."

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Lockhart hesitated. He had not been able to take time to think about this properly, but there was one thing of which he was certain. Gates might not believe him, of course. But that would not matter just so long as Lockhart got another crack at one of 'the grandfathers.'

"I would very much like to meet the doctor who had been treating the old man," he resumed. "This doctor possesses the secret of longevity. Failing that I would like a chance to examine another one of these people. Do you think that could be arranged?"

Lockhart stopped breathing, waiting.

Gates looked faintly uncomfortable. "I suppose so," he said. "That is, if Mr. Hedley . . ." He broke off suddenly, as if remembering something he should have done earlier, and reached for his wallet. Lockhart caught a glimpse of a leather strap crossing the agent's white shirt-front, and felt mildly incredulous that such a young, serious-looking and *ordinary* individual should be wearing a shoulder holster. Then Gates was handing him something.

"Mr. Hedley left this for you," he said.

It was a small sheet of paper, folded in two, and with one side covered with script which would have been small and neat had the writer not so obviously been in a hurry. It began: *Doctor: I have to leave—* But that was a far as Lockhart got.

There was a dull explosion. The floor trembled briefly and the lights went out. But Lockhart barely noticed the power failure, there was plenty of light, far too much of it, streaming in through the window.

For a crazy second he debated with himself whether to continue reading the note or look out the window, then he ran to the window ledge and leaned out. Gates was already there.

The building which housed the dissecting room, mortuary and laboratories of St. Armande's Hospital was not simply on fire. Rather it seemed as though some highly combustible gas was being released from its foundation under fantastic pressure; each door and window and ventilator opening was a giant blow-torch jetting white fire. The incandescent glare faded quickly to the orange and yellow of a more normal conflagration as Lockhart watched, and his stunned senses began to register sound as well as sight.

The noise of whistles blowing and feet running, of voices shouting and some of them screaming. And over all was the loud, hungry crackle of burning timber and splitting masonry. Lockhart looked quickly at his watch.

It was three-fifteen, a.m. Not twenty minutes ago he had left Gerarde in that building, and he had almost stayed behind with the little Army doctor to discuss their findings. Had he done so . . .

Dry mouthed suddenly, Lockhart said, "The flame-throwers. There's been an accident."

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"It wasn't flame-throwers that did that," Gates said thickly. "Or thermite, or gelid petrol, or . . . or anything." He cursed.

Through the small trees and shrubbery dividing them from the burning building, Lockhart saw a figure running towards the blaze. But, twenty yards from the cracking, sagging wall the man was stopped by the heat. He stood motionless for several seconds, then swung about to retrace his steps. The figure took three or four paces, then halted again, and slowly began to back away from something which Lockhart could not see because of an intervening tangle of branches.

The man did not call out, nor did he try to use the gun strapped to his hip. He merely backed towards the flaming building, making vague, pushing motions with his hands. Suddenly he clapped a hand to his cheek. The figure remained frozen in that position for perhaps two seconds, then it slid bonelessly to the ground.

"What . . . ?" began Lockhart.

"Come on!" Gates said harshly. He had also seen the incident. "We must get to that man out there." He gripped Lockhart's arm and almost dragged him from the window. "We must find out who shot him, and why, and get them, too. That is," he added, with doubt tinging the urgency of his tone, "if he was . . . shot."

As they groped their way into the dark corridor, the hospital's emergency lighting went on. Gates broke into a run.

Lockhart, who had been making for the main entrance, felt his arm grabbed again. "This way," Gates said, indicating a small door a few yards away. "That opens onto the so-called 'park.' There's a path through it—badly overgrown—which will save us going around the long way by the drive."

He did not have to mention that if the man out there was dying, then every second saved was important. Gates spoke only once as they were unbarring the seldom used side door. Without looking at Lockhart he muttered, "Harmless!" and gave a politely derisive snort.

IV

The agent plunged into the tangle of trees, bushes, and long grass which began almost as they left the door. Lockhart, who was unfamiliar with the terrain and whose night vision left something to be desired, was groping and stumbling several yards in the rear.

Suddenly, a voice called, "Doctor!"

Lockhart hesitated. Probably someone wanted his help, and had been waiting at the main entrance to take him to the blaze. But he was already on his way to the fire, by a short cut. He waved acknow-

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ledgement, though he could not see anyone to wave at, and pressed on behind Gates. The sound of footsteps told him that whoever had called was following him. Lockhart grimaced to himself and increased his pace.

The light from the fire ahead was uncertain. Several times he thought he saw Gates moving up ahead, only to find that it had been an illusion of light reflections from leaves and branches. It occurred to him how stupid it would be to lose himself at a time like this, and what Gates—and worse still, Hedley—would say about it if he did. Trusting more to luck than vision, Lockhart broke into a stumbling run.

There were rustling noises ahead. Suddenly he saw the agent not more than six yards in front of him. Greatly relieved, Lockhart was about to call for the other to slow down when his foot caught in a root.

Automatically he twisted sideways, trying to disengage it before he lost balance so as to avoid a broken ankle. He succeeded, but fell heavily onto his right knee, and still rolling landed in what felt like a drainage ditch. It was about three feet deep and practically overgrown with brambles. Lockhart lay, mouth open and gasping silently with the sharp pain in his knee, wondering if he had cracked the patella.

The pain subsided slightly, and Lockhart blinked the moisture from his eyes. He grew aware that footsteps—two pairs of them—were approaching. Presumably Gates was returning to find out the reason for his lagging behind, and the man who had called him a few minutes back was just catching up. He raised his head, trying to see over the edge of the ditch. He saw Gates first.

The agent was returning slowly along the path, an arm extended to protect his face against low branches, and muttering steadily to himself. One thing only kept Lockhart from calling out to him ; shame. Lockhart was scratched and dirty and his knee hurt. The thought of being helped from a ditch by a young man who required the assistance of a doctor, and who, because of his carelessness, had instead acquired a patient made him writhe. But this was no time to think of his stupid pride, he told himself scornfully. He had to attract the agent's attention, or lie in a muddy ditch all night. He opened his mouth to speak.

Just then the figure who had been following him moved into his field of vision.

Lockhart was abruptly unable to make a sound ; his tongue, together with the rest of his body, was in a tightening grip of fear paralysis.

It was the face.

There were eyes, a nose and a mouth, but with the possible exception of the eyes, the features seemed to be in constant, writhing motion, expanding and contracting independently of each other as if possessed

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of a life of their own. If the sight could be likened to anything in Lockhart's experience, it resembled a gargoyle's head seen through rippling water. From that horrible jelly of a face, words came.

"Doctor Lockhart?"

Gates, who was still too far away to distinguish the face clearly, made a startled, interrogative sound.

Something went *phtt*.

The agent slapped at something on his forehead. Lockhart saw him take a pace forward, then stumble and fall to his knees. Gates held the kneeling position for perhaps a second, then he toppled forward onto his face. His head hit a branch on the way down before thudding against a sharp-edged piece of paving, but the injuries did not bother the agent. Nothing, Lockhart knew, would ever bother the agent again.

The thing with the jelly face, after carefully walking around the prostrate body of Gates, continued towards the blazing lab building.

Lockhart's fear paralysis left him, apparently moving from the feet up. He found himself running even before his panic-stricken mind could form any idea of where he was going. Suddenly he was out on the driveway, about thirty yards from the main gate. Remembering the guards, he tried to stop, but his brain had no control over his feet at all. He passed the gatehouse at a dead run, unchallenged. The guards must have been asleep at their post. Or more likely, dead.

Outside he slowed to a walk only because he had not the breath to continue running. He would have liked to think that a measure of calmness had returned to him, and that the reason he was walking was that he would attract less attention that way, but he knew that such was not the case. He was horribly, abyssmally afraid.

After what seemed like hours Lockhart found an all-night cafe. He dropped into a chair and began searching for a handkerchief to clean some of the grime from his face. In one pocket his fingers touched paper, and he remembered Hedley's note. He pulled it out, smoothed it and read it through quickly, then read it again. He began to laugh.

Hedley had been asked to go to Berlin. The Provost Marshal of the American Sector there had received a strong protest from the Russian Commandant regarding spying. The 'spy'—who was known to have crossed from the American side to attend an orchestral concert—had thrown a scare into them because, though a very old man, he had taken some form of poison rather than answer the routine questions put by an ordinary policeman.

In the agent's opinion the protest had been genuine, and that the 'spy' had frightened the Russian authorities as much, if not more,

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than similar old men had affected the French. If this were so, then the Russians could not be the culprits. But the agent was only judging by the 'feel' of the situation, and as yet had no proof either way.

The note ended by saying that his relations with the hospital personnel had grown suddenly cool. Hedley was not sure of the reason for this, but he thought that orders must have come from very high up to drop the investigation of 'the grandfathers,' and this puzzled and worried him. He advised Lockhart to keep his eyes open, and he was leaving an agent at the hospital to take his report of the autopsy, and to see that the Doctor was made comfortable.

Comfortable ! Lockhart thought grimly. If Hedley only knew. He pushed the note into his pocket and signalled towards the cafe's proprietor, enquiring in his most careful French whether there was a telephone on the premises. There was, and he called a taxi to take him back to his hotel.

Lockhart made himself relax, his prescription being food, a hot bath and a very easy chair. He had always considered himself as a psychologically stable person. Now he told himself firmly that he was miles from the hospital, safe in his room, and with all the lights switched on. There was nothing behind the drapes or under the bed, and the only things which could harm him were the phantoms conjured up by his own mind. And, Lockhart told himself grimly, it was high time he brought that mind under control.

He had to look his spectre straight in the face, then try to analyse what exactly it was that he saw.

As Lockhart went over the incident again, several things became obvious. From the short, muffled sound it had made, the weapon which had killed Gates must have been a form of air pistol—probably shooting a small pellet or needle coated with the same fast-acting poison carried by 'the grandfathers.' Also, Lockhart's name had been called twice by the killer—once just before the death of Gates. The agent, then, had been killed in the mistaken idea that he had been Lockhart. But why, leaving aside the spine-chilling nature of the assassin for the moment, did someone at the hospital want to kill him ?

Doggedly, Lockhart tried to reduce the problem to its simplest terms. Longevity ; harmless old men who killed themselves rather than answer questions ; an investigation, considered important enough to require assistance from another Government, suddenly dropped. Deliberately he refused to consider the grotesque aspects of the problem. They would merely confuse him, and he could come back to them after he made the relatively more normal pieces of the puzzle make sense.

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Slowly, with many gaps and blanks, a picture took form, a very unpleasant picture. Lockhart's mind shied away from it at first ; he still had a few illusions, and if such a conspiracy was possible in one government, why not others ? But unpleasant though it was, he knew that his theory fitted the facts, and he had to face up to that.

Lockhart pushed himself out of his chair and began pacing the room. His scratches stung and his knee still hurt, but the walls of the room seemed suddenly to be closing in on him, and movement helped dispel the illusion. Lockhart was aware that he was no longer safe, or even free. He was in possession of knowledge which a powerful group had committed wholesale murder and arson in order to keep secret, and he might already have been traced to his hotel.

Somewhere, Lockhart knew, there must be a doctor with the ability to prolong life, and the individuals given this priceless gift were carefully chosen. Some of them occupied high positions in at least one government, with sufficient authority to protect themselves should their secret be endangered. The incident at the hospital was proof of that, where they had ruthlessly wiped out Gerarde and his assistant together with, they thought, the only other person with the longevity knowledge, himself. And the people without knowledge—the ordinary personnel of the hospital—had merely been ordered to drop the investigation.

But why had they allowed the investigation in the first place ? Probably, Lockhart answered himself, they had believed that nothing would come of it.

He was not quite sure where the suicidal old men fitted in, but he guessed that these had been members of the group who had fallen from grace and been left to die of old age. Something hellish had been done to their minds first, though.

Lockhart could not even guess at the purpose of the unknown doctor in having this secret—and probably international—group of long-lived individuals in his power. To understand his reasons, a wide experience in the realms of abnormal psychology would be required. The man must be insane.

The fact which had to be faced was that he, Lockhart, was the only living person outside the group with any knowledge of its existence. Its method of protecting itself was all too plain ; Lockhart would have to be killed before he had a chance to pass on his suspicions.

He thought of writing Hedley a letter, care of M.I.5 or the Foreign Office, or wherever it was that the agent reported to. But even on the small chance that it would reach its destination—if the hotel was under surveillance, his letters would undoubtedly be opened—the chances were that it would be destroyed as enamating from a crackpot. Fer-

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vently, Lockhart wished that Hedley was with him now. The agent would be able to handle a situation like this. He could not think of any way out at all.

Dawn came eventually, then time for breakfast. He ordered it and his later meals of the day sent to the room. He was sure that if he left it, he would not return. Someone would be waiting for him downstairs. Not his executioner, but maybe just an ordinary policeman who would take him into custody on a charge trumped up by the group. Undoubtedly they had the power to enlist the aid of the unsuspecting *gendarmerie* in this, and when Lockhart was safely in gaol, an accident would occur.

That night he did without supper and kept all the lights turned off, hoping that a watcher would think him gone from the room and not bother checking this with the receptionist. He locked the door and windows, and in the darkness he thought. It was the longest night of his life.

The following morning he was vaguely surprised that his hair was not white, but he had made a decision. After breakfast he changed quickly into the clothes he had worn two nights ago. He was pale, unshaven and ragged—and, he hoped, unrecognisable. He was convinced that whoever was watching for him would not remain passive much longer, and he was determined to make a break for it.

There was a fire escape running past his bedroom window down into an alley behind the hotel. Almost certainly the alley was watched, but he was praying for a miracle. Once down there he could mingle with the crowd in the street. He might even be able to get out of the country.

Lockhart had the window leading to the fire escape open when there was a faint click from his bedroom door. He wheeled about to see the door handle turning slowly. Paralysed with terror he saw the door begin to swing open.

Stupidly, and for the first time in two days, he had forgotten to lock it.

"You have the right idea, Doctor," Hedley said, eyeing him up and down. "But that . . ." He jiggled the door handle, ". . . was careless."

V

Hedley paced slowly up and down the room: from the cream-painted door past the single bed, the dresser with its cracked, full-length mirror and the wash-stand—also cracked—to the window which looked out across the busy rue de Londres to the unlovely granite heap

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of the Gare Saint Lazare. The agent's face, as usual, was expressionless, but his heels dug into the worn hotel carpet a little too heavily, and his cigarette, when he remembered to draw on it, glowed bright orange and shrank visibly. Hedley was very, very angry.

The agent had returned from Berlin to find that a fire had taken heavy toll of life and property at Saint Armande's, the investigation dropped and nobody at all willing to answer questions about anything. 'The grandfathers,' he had been told, were harmless, merely innocent members of a cult with peculiarly strong ideals of personal liberty of mind, and an intense aversion towards any form of coercion. All relevant police and intelligence departments had been notified of this, as had Hedley's own government, and his orders to return home were undoubtedly on the way.

It had all been an unfortunate mistake, doubly unfortunate in that two of his men, Gates and Lockhart, had perished in the terrible fire which had occurred in his absence.

And that, Lockhart knew, explained why he had not been tracked to his hotel. Gates' face had been badly cut up, and most of the men who could have identified Lockhart with accuracy were already dead in the fire, and so they had mistaken the agent's body for his own. One of the hospital staff casualties must have borne a close resemblance to Gates, which explained why both of them were believed dead. Lockhart's two days of mental anguish had been unnecessary.

But Hedley had not believed the story the two senior officers at the hospital had told him, and neither, he suspected, had they. Still confused by the sudden reversal of their orders, they had been unsure of the exact powers they possessed. Otherwise, Lockhart now knew, Hedley would not have left the hospital alive.

The agent had then gone to Lockhart's hotel to take care of the doctor's effects and notify the next of kin, and as he was on the point of entering the building, had discovered he was being followed. On finding Lockhart alive, and realising that his shadow could obtain the same information from the desk, he had whisked the doctor off to another hotel, receiving the autopsy report on the old man en route.

That had been three days—and two more hotels—ago. Hedley believed that a moving target was safer than a stationary one.

In sudden irritation, Lockhart tried to halt the slowly pacing agent with a question.

"This etymologist we're expecting, is he local?"

Hedley shook his head. "He's with the department. Decoding section." He continued his slow march.

"What I don't understand is why we are being hunted like this," Lockhart said as the agent completed another circuit. "We're on

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friendly terms with them, and in the event of a war we would be allies, yet they're willing to risk international complications by killing us. Don't they know you will have reported this to your department by this time?"

"This group apparently doesn't care about international complications," Hedley said. He stopped at the window and swung round to face Lockhart. "As I've mentioned before, there's a war brewing. Nobody wants it; repeat, *nobody*. But with the mess of rumours, abuse, mutual recriminations and sheer semantic gibberish being thrown about, it will certainly come."

Grimly, Hedley went on to paint a sombre word-picture of current international events. He gave names, times and places, and told of the dark intrigues and jockeyings for power, and of the hidden, potentially explosive fermentation of minds that was being stirred up by some group bent only upon war. If events continued as at present, he could give to within a week the date on which the war would start.

All at once Lockhart did not want this knowledge he was being given. It frightened him—worse, it gave him a feeling of responsibility, a feeling that he should do something about it. Still, he reassured himself, it was perhaps only gossip, Top Secret, triply-classified gossip, and it was a good thing that Lockhart didn't talk in his sleep.

"It's an incredibly dirty and senseless business," Hedley went on. "If we only knew the purpose behind it, what it was that they hoped to gain, then maybe we could understand and do something about it. Your theory was ingenius, Doctor, but I think there is something more behind this than a small group of long-lived individuals intent on keeping their secret." He gave a baffled shake of his head. "As it is, you might as well try to understand a happy, healthy man committing suicide."

A sudden double knock on the door made Lockhart jump, though both had been expecting it. Hedley called, "Push!"

Three men trooped in and made themselves comfortable on his counterpane. They were Fox, Draper and Simpson, and Lockhart had come to know them well over the past two days. Fox said, "Carson and the Brain will be along in a minute," and joined his companions in silence.

Lockhart knew Carson, too. The other person referred to must be the expert on languages, he guessed.

"His name," said Hedley reprovingly, "is Professor Brian."

Evidently the etymologist was sensitive about nicknames, and when the professor arrived a few minutes later, Lockhart could understand why.

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He was a tall, very thin individual in the middle forties, with big, boney hands and a grip like iron, and he had a sad, hungry expression on his face which had the look of permanence. His forehead had a slight but distinct bulge outward, and the joins between the frontal and patietal bones of his skull were plainly visible through a hairless and almost transparent scalp. Lockhart had to make an effort to keep from staring at that peculiarly shaped head, and he wondered what psychological quirk kept the Professor from wearing a wig. He was obviously a very shy man.

Lockhart was beginning a surreptitious analysis of the Professor's personality—a minor vice of his when meeting a person for the first time—when Hedley's voice cut it short.

"We want to find out as much as possible about these old men before we leave," the agent began conversationally. "Especially, their place of origin. If we knew that, maybe we could understand what exactly is happening here, and why." As he spoke he made some adjustments to the tape-recorder on the bedside table. Finished, he straightened and asked whether Carson had filled the Professor in on the background to date.

"Yes," Carson replied. "He knows everything."

There was a click.

On the playback Lockhart heard his own heavy breathing again as he traced and finally extracted the capsule from the mouth of the old man on the boulevard St. Michel, and his urgent call to Hedley to make it fast. Then came the agent's voice :

"What is your name? Where are you from?"

The answers still sounded like 'Hargon' and 'Vitlim.'

"Why are you here?"

Answer : gibberish.

Lockhart mentioned delirium, and Hedley wondered aloud why the old man couldn't rave in English. Then :

"I mus' speak English," the old man's wavering voice returned, "and think in English. Even among the . . . the . . ." It faded into silence.

"That's all," Hedley said shortly, switching off. He looked at the professor. "Do you want to hear it again."

Professor Brian nodded. Hedley played the tape again. And again. In all he played it over seven times before the professor signalled that he had heard enough.

Carefully avoiding Hedley's questioning stare, the professor looked at Lockhart thoughtfully.

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"Would you say," the etymologist asked quietly, "that this old man's physiological structure was normal enough for the 'truth drug' to have the usual effect?"

"I would," said Lockhart, "with no hesitation."

"Oh," said the Professor, his face becoming sadder and even hungrier in its expression. "Oh," he repeated.

"But where does he come from?" Hedley asked. Impatience was making his tone downright rude.

"Before I answer," Professor Brian said, glancing across at Lockhart, "you must understand that I've assumed—justifiably, I think—one very important fact, namely, that the truth drug administered to the old man worked. Assuming this, his 'Hargon' and 'Vitlim' replies

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were, so far as he was concerned, true answers to your questions, and the gibberish which followed the more complicated question "Why are you here?" was the same.

"The fact that he did not start speaking English until after your aside to Dr. Lockhart—which went, I believe, "Why can't he rave in English?"—makes my assumption that he was answering in his own language practically a certainty."

"But what language was it?" Hedley said impatiently.

The Professor dropped his eyes. "I . . . I don't know," he replied, his voice barely audible.

"I see," said Hedley.

"There are many languages and local dialects which are unfamiliar to me," the etymologist began defensively. "I can state definitely, however, that the language I've just heard does not belong to any of the technologically advanced nations, either friendly or potentially dangerous to us; those, I know."

His voice rising in pitch, the Professor went on quickly, "It could be an artificial language, such as Io or Esperanto. But against that is the fact that a person in a 'truth-drugged' state invariably speaks his native tongue unless told to do otherwise by his questioner. This language," the Professor said thickly, pointing suddenly at the tape-recorder and making angry, stabbing motions with a long and boney index finger, "has not got the *feel* of an artificial language."

Lockhart could see that something was bothering Professor Brian, something more than the simple loss of face over not being able to identify a few gabbled words.

From his position against the wall, Carson coughed slightly and said, "Tibet, maybe? Ancient knowledge handed down through the ages, and all that." He seemed to be half joking. "The Tibetans might have the secret of longevity . . ."

The Professor silenced him with a look.

Hedley, who had been watching the etymologist closely for some minutes, said, "Something's biting you, Professor: What is it?"

"Just this," the etymologist said, looking acutely uncomfortable. "In my opinion, the language did not originate on this planet." He glared at Hedley, as if daring him to laugh.

"I'd thought of that, too," Hedley said evenly. He was not laughing.

Springs creaked and twanged as the three agents lying slouched across the bed sat bolt upright. Carson seemed to be in partial shock. He stared at Hedley, his mouth opening and closing slowly, but with no sound coming out. To Lockhart, the situation had the unreal

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quality of a crazy, but rather funny dream. From a dry and pedantic discussion on language to *this* ! The transition had been too sudden . . .

Dazedly, Lockhart heard himself protesting to Hedley that Mars or Venus had more or less been written off so far as suitability for human life was concerned.

" I meant, of course, an extra-Solar planet," the Professor put in.

" But of course," Carson said. He had regained his voice, but his expression still reminded Lockhart vaguely of a goldfish suffering from concussion. Involuntarily, he laughed.

" This is serious," Hedley said in mild reproval.

Lockhart realised suddenly that it was. Deadly serious.

" If these old men are extra-terrestrials," Hedley said after a thoughtful silence, " that would explain the longevity treatments, which indicates an advanced medical science, as well as their physical abnormalities—though it surprises me that they resemble us so closely. It also explains the actions of the government here, if we postulate the presence of a group within it who may have been promised longevity as a reward for secret co-operation with the aliens. This group disregarded the investigation of ' the grandfathers ' because the aliens had assured them that nothing could be found out from that source, the poison carried by the old men destroying all trace of a highly-advanced medical treatment within their systems."

Hedley shot Lockhart a brief, questioning look, seeking corroboration of this. Lockhart nodded agreement, and the agent continued :

" But when we did begin to find out things, they panicked. A hospital building burnt with those inside it. Several people killed by means unknown, including one of my men. And the attempted murder of the Doctor here. Their action had about the subtlety of a steam-roller going over a pup, and would have had the same degree of effectiveness if Dr. Lockhart had not managed to escape.

" Then, to top it all off, they explain everything with a story a child could see through." He snorted. " A fanatical religious sect !"

Watching Hedley's eyes, Lockhart began to feel afraid. There was a peculiar look in them, a look that the doctor had come to know during his brief U.N. work with refugee children. In them the look had been more concentrated because there had been no attempt to disguise it. It was the expression of someone who was suddenly alone, with the props of parents, friends and country pulled from beneath them.

And Hedley had that look.

" Their story is too transparent," the agent went on. " They're being too careless about this. Either they don't have to maintain secrecy much longer—the war blowing up will shift interest elsewhere

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—or . . ." Hedley's voice dropped so that Lockhart almost missed the final words. ". . . other governments are similarly riddled with this extra-terrestrial fifth column, and a few individuals, like ourselves, can do nothing."

Traffic noises drifted up from the street, sharply punctuated by the authoritive whistling of a *gendarme*, gradually diluting the silence of the room. Draper pushed himself from the bed and walked to the window. Looking out, he said, "These extra-terrestrials will be responsible for the war, then?"

"They must be," Hedley said. "But what I can't understand is *why*. An atomic war will wreck and depopulate the planet. Surely if they have interstellar travel they must have found other planets which were uninhabited and just waiting to be colonised. Why should they go to all this trouble?"

Draper turned from the window to face Hedley again. He said, "What can we do?"

He was a dark-jowled, taciturn type who treated his words like gold dust, and then only used them to get to the point of things and to stay on it. He resembled his chief in many ways, and Lockhart guessed that he rated next in seniority to Hedley.

"Nothing," Hedley answered. "At least, not here. We'd be blocked in every move we made. But I'm convinced that these old men can be found in other cities besides Paris and Berlin. We know that they travel a lot." He shook his head irritably. "But I still can't understand how they fit into all this. *Old* men!"

Old, harmless and rather likeable men, Lockhart thought, and in their youth, great men, despite their extra-terrestrial origin. His emotions told him that they were not the type who would burn and murder and plunge a world into war. But emotions were untrustworthy at times, and they had, after all, been willing to kill themselves rather than answer questions.

"If you're looking for leads outside this country," Carson said abruptly, "what about the couple I followed from the boulevard St. Michel?"

VI

For the first time in Lockhart's recollection, he saw the agent look faintly ashamed of himself.

"I'd forgotten those two," Hedley said. "I was inclined to agree with Lockhart here that they were simply passers-by, and with this other stuff coming up . . ." He shook his head. "What did you find out, anyway?"

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" Not much," Carson said. Diffidently, he went on, " I followed them to the Hotel Lombardi on the boulevard Hausmann, which is a fairly big place about ten minutes walk from here and showed the card that the Sûreté issued to us to the hotel receptionist. She identified them as a Mr. and Miss Kelly, a brother and sister who had come on a five-day Cook's tour from Belfast and were due to return the next day.

" Their behaviour was normal for the younger type of tourist ; excursions and walks during the day, shows at night. The only oddity noticed by the receptionist was that their tastes were rather highbrow ; they seemed to prefer serious choral and orchestral concerts to night-clubbing. The girl was well-liked in the hotel, especially by the older people there."

Carson paused, as though to emphasize the words to follow, then went on, " Apparently she made friends with—or at least spoke to—as many of the older residents in the hotel as she could manage."

Hedley grunted. " Alone, that doesn't mean much," he said, but there was a gleam of interest in his eye.

" I followed them into the lounge," Carson continued, " but couldn't get close enough to them. The girl spoke too low to be heard, and the man seemed to be speaking English, but with a peculiar accent. I heard him plainly at times, but his words were . . . were run together, sort of, so that I couldn't quite make them out. One phrase was repeated several times, something about ' Going back to baling tay ' it sounded like. I felt I should have understood him, but that accent defeated me."

" An Irish accent ?" asked Professor Brian.

" I don't think so," Carson replied. " I've travelled in Ireland a bit, and I think I know most of the accents there." He shook his head. " I'd say it was an *English* accent, except that I'm familiar with those, too."

" That girl didn't *look* Irish," Hedley said softly. He seemed to be talking to himself.

" And neither did her brother look like her brother," Carson added. " But that, in itself, doesn't prove anything, either . . ." He trailed off into silence.

" We must remember," Hedley said, getting to his feet, " that these two spoke to the old man, and that the girl appeared disturbed either by his answer, or his inability to answer, her question. She doesn't have the physical characteristics of the nationality she claims, and neither does her ' brother ' who speaks with an accent which does not fit that nationality either. Quite possibly there is a simple and innocent explanation. But on the other hand . . . Dr. Lockhart !"

Startled by the agent's sudden change of tone, Lockhart said, " Huh ? "

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"It would be better if you came with us, Doctor," Hedley said. "You are in danger here. Besides, we may come across some old men in Ireland . . ."

The agent paused awkwardly, for the first time in Lockhart's recollection visibly at a loss for words. Then decisively, he went on :-

"I'm sorry I had to get you mixed up in this, Doctor. Really sorry. But now that you are in, we might as well make this official. The job pays well, though there isn't much future in it these days. And you'll be free to go, naturally, just as soon as this affair is cleared up."

It was several seconds before Lockhart realised that the agent was asking him to join his organisation.

"Contrary to popular belief, the Home Office cares about its agents," Hedley added. "Usually it is impossible to help them if they get into trouble,"—he smiled wryly—"but they do care."

Jumbled and out of sequence, the events of the past few days made flickering, grotesque pictures in his mind. The lab at the hospital, and the explosive violence of the fire which had consumed it : the old man on the Boul Mich who had been *allowed* to grow old and die, when continued treatment would have preserved him : the death of Gates, and the terrifying visage of his slayer. And somewhere in all this was the secret of longevity, and a medical science so advanced that the thought of it brought an almost physical pain, like the aching pangs of hunger.

His findings during the autopsy had opened a door. Through it Lockhart had glimpsed things which had excited him, both as a doctor and as a man, more than anything in his previous experience. But the door had been slammed in his face.

As he nodded in acceptance, Lockhart knew that it was not the power for good which that science would give to his profession that made him decide to join Hedley. With a feeling of self-disgust that amounted almost to hatred, he knew that his chief reason for doing so was fear. Too many things had been happening to him, and he wanted protection. Most of all, he was horribly afraid of being left alone.

"Good !" Hedley said, getting to his feet. "We'd better leave at once, then." He began giving instructions to Fox about passports and a stop at the British Embassy to pick up any last-minute messages from home. They left the room in two groups, ten minutes apart.

Lockhart was not yet used to the fact that he was now a secret agent. Knowing himself as he did, it seemed unfair to the other agents—they, at least, were not afraid of their own shadows. Now that they were actually doing something again, they looked almost happy.

With the exception of Draper, they boarded an Aer Lingus 'Viscount' bound for Dublin. If a watch was being kept for them it could be

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concentrated at the London departure points, Hedley had reasoned, because the Paris authorities would know that he had received orders to return to England. What they did not know was that Hedley had no intention of obeying those orders—at least, not until he thought it safe to do so. He was not cutting himself off entirely from his department, however, and that was where Draper came in.

Draper was to return to London and report everything which had occurred, *unless*—Hedley had laid heavy stress on his instructions at that point—there were indications that pressure similar to that which had throttled the investigation in Paris was being brought to bear on the department. If such should be the case, he was to know nothing about anything, especially regarding Hedley's plans or whereabouts. And he was not to rejoin Hedley unless he could do so in the absolute certainty that he was not being followed.

As the 'Viscount' began to shed height rapidly on its approach to Dublin Airport, and Lockhart's ears buzzed and popped uncomfortably with the increasing pressure, Hedley outlined his immediate plans.

"We should arrive in time to catch the six-thirty train to Belfast," he said, indicating the time-table on his knee. "Professor Brian and Dr. Lockhart can travel together, but the rest of us, being armed, had better split up. Occasionally the Customs officials search a traveller, Carson tells me, and if we were found carrying fire-arms there would be trouble. We could get out of it, but not without having to loudly advertise our presence in the country.

"We'll join up on arrival in Belfast," Hedley added. His eyes travelled over the group, and he asked suddenly, "Is everyone fixed as regards currency?"

Lockhart had not had time to change his francs before leaving, but he had enough sterling to manage for a while. He nodded in unison with the others. Hedley turned to watch the city that was sliding up to meet them.

The Customs inspection on both sides of the border was perfunctory. Brian and Lockhart, both with visions of armed police ransacking their scanty luggage, were considerably relieved when the substance turned out to be a pair of elderly, white-capped individuals who enquired politely and almost apologetically whether they were carrying undue quantities of liquor, jewellery or cigarettes—relieved, and just a little disappointed.

Later, as they were waiting for Hedley and the others outside the Great Northern station, Lockhart asked a question that had been bothering him for some time.

"Suppose there *are* more of the old men here, what can we do? We know nothing about them. Nothing, that is, which could stop them from dying on us like the others."

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The Professor shrugged. "I don't know," he said, momentarily raising his voice above the sound of a passing bus. "But you're not quite accurate in saying that we know nothing about them. Apart from knowledge of their, as yet, inexplicable behaviour towards us, we have three small and probably useless pieces of information : two words in their language, and one fact. The words are 'Hargon' and 'Vitlim,' and while their exact meaning is obscure, we do know that the first was a person who apparently came from the second, a place."

"And the fact?" Lockhart asked impatiently. The Professor's pedantic manner of speech irritated him at times.

"Oh," replied Brian, "That this 'Hargon' of 'Vitlim' is dead."

Lockhart held back a sarcastic retort with an effort. It was like being able to say "Good Morning" in Chinese when all the Chinamen one knew spoke perfect English. The aliens probably knew that he was dead, but if they did not, and if this 'Hargon' turned out to be someone special . . .

The idea that had begun to take form at the back of his mind dissolved with the sudden arrival of the rest of the party. They squeezed into a taxi which deposited them, six minutes later, at their chosen hotel. It was there that Lockhart who had certain fixed ideas regarding secret agents and their work, became rudely and abruptly disillusioned.

Lockhart, though still convinced that trailing the Kellys to Ireland was a waste of time, had not pressed his opinions too hard with Hedley —anything which caused their rapid departure from Paris at that time met with Lockhart's approval. But he had expected the agents to gather in Hedley's room for a council of war, and to plan their next moves. Instead, the agents freshened up as quickly as possible and headed for the street. Lockhart went hurriedly in search of Hedley.

The agent must have read Lockhart's outraged feelings in his face. He laughed.

"Don't look so shocked, Doctor," Hedley said, wriggling into a sports-shirt of a particularly deafening tartan pattern. "We're off duty. Until I find out something about the Kellys or hear from Draper, nothing more can be done. Cook's don't open until nine o'clock tomorrow morning and the earliest we can expect word from London is two-thirty in the afternoon. So get your coat, Doc, the night is still young!"

Lockhart was still trying to equate this suddenly carefree Hedley with the grim, unsmiling agent of a few hours ago when Professor Brian joined them. They left the hotel together.

It had grown dark. The streets were wet from a recent shower, and reflected bright, distorted images of neon-lit shop fronts and passing traffic. As they wandered aimlessly about, Hedley had comments to

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make on everything in sight—usually of a humorously provocative nature that had Brian or Lockhart rushing to defend the point under attack. Hedley was putting himself out to be amusing, and when they stopped at a pub for a drink, and Brian gave his impression of a drunk nuclear physicist getting tied up in his polysyllables, even Lockhart became infected with it, though he suspected that it was a ruse of Hedley's to take their minds off the alien problem. They returned to the hotel just before midnight.

For the first time in almost a week, Lockhart had an unbroken night's sleep. Nightmareless, too.

The next morning Hedley's role was again that of chief of a counter-espionage department. His first move was to question Cook's people about the Kellys, and because Lockhart wanted some money changed, he was taken along as well. The others were told to wait where they were.

Professor Brian discovered suddenly that he had business which he wanted to transact at Cook's too. Hedley told him firmly that three was a crowd, curiosity killed the cat and he could just cool his heels until the Doctor and himself were finished.

The clerk at the Continental Travel counter was tall, red-haired, aged about twenty and inclined to be talkative. His name-plate said MR. MURRAY, and mention of Miss Kelly brought an immediate and pleasurable response.

" I know her, of course," he said, smiling. " The Kellys—she has a brother—are very good clients."

" They travel a lot, then ? " Hedley asked.

" They do, indeed. Paris, Rome, the Tyrol, the French Alps and twice to Switzerland." He indicated a technicoloured travel brochure about thirty pages thick, and added, " They seem to be working their way through that thing."

" Different spot every year, eh ? "

" No," said the clerk, in the tone of one not expecting to be believed. " They covered those places within the past ten weeks. It's most unusual . . ." He broke off, realising perhaps that he had been on the point of breaking a confidence, and asked Hedley how he could be of assistance.

Unusual, Lockhart thought, *but not criminal.* Abruptly he wondered why it was that he did not want this Miss Kelly to be mixed up in this. What difference did it make to him ?

" . . . I found some papers belonging to Miss Kelly in the hotel where I was staying," Hedley was saying. " When I asked about her at the desk they told me she had left for here the previous day, so I thought that I might as well bring them with me. They may be important, and I knew that you could give me her address for me to

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post them to her." He smiled disarmingly. "Will you look up the address for me, please?"

Mr. Murray was on the point of opening a heavy ledger when he stopped suddenly and looked up.

"You could leave the papers here if you like," the clerk said helpfully. "She comes in a lot, and I could give them to her."

Lockhart could imagine Hedley swearing under his breath, but the good-natured mask never slipped for an instant. "I have them at my hotel," he said smoothly. "But you say she comes here often? Maybe I could hand them over personally?"

"I don't know," the clerk replied. "Her passport was being fixed up for their next trip, and we expect her to pick it up today sometime. You know," he went on confidingly, "she and her brother come here a lot, but not always on business. They just stand watching the people who come in and out, occasionally asking which countries they are going to, then, on the spur of the moment sometimes, they decide to go there themselves. Their trip to Paris happened that way." He shrugged, smiling. "But she is a really nice girl . . ." He stopped, apparently in embarrassment at something he had said, or was about to say. He was beginning to blush.

Young Mr. Murray was more than somewhat smitten with the beautiful and incredibly well-travelled Miss Kelly's looks, it seemed. If he only knew what he was doing to the girl, this friendly, garrulous, *stupid* young man . . . ! The savagery of his thought surprised and shocked Lockhart.

Again he asked himself, what did it matter to him?

"This passport," Hedley said, and there was a hard edge in the tone of his voice, "Can I see it?"

"No, sir," Murray said firmly. "That isn't allowed." He was beginning to look puzzled, and uneasy.

"I want to see Mr. Griffin," Hedley said abruptly. Seeing Murray's increasing uneasiness, he had pity. "It's about a different matter," he lied. The clerk disappeared.

To Lockhart, he said, "Griffin is the manager of this branch. His name was in the 'phone book. I may be able to bluff him into letting me see that passport without having to identify myself fully, but I'll have to work on him alone." As Murray reappeared, trailed by a small, grey-haired man, Hedley ended hastily, "Get your money changed, then wait for me outside."

Five minutes at the Bureau de Change counter finished his business, and zipping up his wallet, Lockhart turned to leave. Suddenly he froze and began looking wildly around for Hedley.

Miss Kelly had just come in.

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VII

Murray, fortunately, was involved with an elderly pair of Dutch tourists, and had not yet seen her. Hedley had gone, probably into some inner office with Griffin. The problem, therefore, was all his. But what could he *do* ?

Whatever he did, Lockhart knew, he would have to do it quickly. If Murray should look aside and see her, and start telling her about lost papers and men asking questions about her . . . Lockhart swallowed and took a step forward.

What would Hedley do in a case like this ?

Talk to her, the answer came. Get her outside on some pretext and away from Murray, then keep her there until help in some form arrived—except that Hedley would not require help. Only amateurs, like Lockhart, needed help. His hands felt suddenly moist, and sweat prickled the skin around his lumbar vertebrae. The long stretch of terrazzo flooring seemed to be covered six inches deep in syrup, and he was trying to wade through it.

She still looked to be an ordinary girl of twenty or thereabouts, Lockhart thought as he approached ; though it was difficult to be sure of her age because of the almost child-like expression in her face. Obviously an emotionally immature type, Lockhart thought. But then he knew that already from seeing her behaviour at that concert.

He had gone to the concert only seven days ago, though it seemed now to be far away in time as well as space. His only problems then had been a not very pressing one of choosing between two jobs that had been offered him, and the immediate one of obtaining a good seat. He did get one of the best—and cheapest—seats in the hall, one of the few benches perched above and behind the orchestra. Lockhart was practically looking over the shoulder of every musician, observing each gesture and expression on the conductor's face and clearly seeing, when his eyes were occasionally directed away from the sweating, dedicated face of the conductor, the reactions to the music of the patrons in the plush luxury of the orchestra stalls.

It was at the conclusion of the first piece—Mendelssohn's Hebridian Overture ' Fingal's Cave '—that he first noticed the girl later to be identified as Miss Kelly. He couldn't help noticing her. She had stood up and cheered and clapped so wildly that the applause of a highly-demonstrative French audience had seemed almost tepid by comparison. After the second work—Hardy's arrangement of the ' Londonderry Air,' strangely enough—she had not cheered, but sat huddled and forlorn with big tears rolling down her cheeks. Lockhart had been unable to take his eyes off her for long after that.

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The major work of the evening had been Beethoven's Fifth. During it Lockhart had felt that he was watching the girl bare her very soul. As movement followed movement she wept, beat her fists against the arms of her seat, covered her face with her hands and writhed in a very ecstasy of emotion. Lockhart had been in turn fascinated, sympathetic, then almost angry with the knowledge that he could never experience such intensity of feeling. After the final, crashing chords, when the conductor—wearing an expression of extreme fatigue and self-gratification reminiscent of a mother after a difficult but successful delivery—was waving the orchestra to its feet, Miss Kelly had been a flaccid, emotionally spent bundle on her seat, too overcome even to clap.

And this was the girl that Hedley suspected of being mixed up with the aliens.

The thought came crawling into his mind that some of the old men had been music lovers, and that one had risked crossing to the Russian sector of Berlin to attend a concert. He pushed it back hurriedly, telling himself that it had been sheer coincidence. But he was six paces from her now and he still didn't know what he was going to say or do.

Feverishly, Lockhart wracked his brains for an opening that would hold her interest and yet not frighten her off ; in vain. His bedside manner had never been good, he had not Hedley's easy charm and even at the age of thirty he still felt awkward before strangers. What was he going to say ?

Suddenly he thought of a remark the Professor had made on their arrival the previous night. It was a mad, an insane, risk if the girl was an alien. Hedley would undoubtedly blow up if he bungled it. But if she was what she appeared to be, then it could be laughed off as mistaken identity with the minimum of embarrassment on both sides.

Lockhart stopped two feet from her. Looking into her slightly upturned face he said quietly, " Hargon is dead."

The reaction was startling. Her eyes reflected a fear that was close to panic and she burst into a low, impassioned tirade. He was being accused of something, Lockhart knew instinctively, but of what he had no idea, because the accusation was being delivered in the same alien gabble he had heard for the first time in Paris, the language which was not of Earth.

It was a case of mistaken identity, all right, Lockhart thought as a cold, crawling sensation tightened his scalp. But who had he been mistaken for ? Judging by the reaction, it must be someone in authority.

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" Speak English, you fool !" he said in an angry whisper. By sheer luck he had the jump on the girl. She was obviously afraid of him, and he meant to keep the initiative.

Hedley, he thought, would have approved of this. But deep inside him Lockhart felt the stirrings of shame and self-disgust. The bold approach was easy when the opponent was a frightened young girl.

" Why should we speak English ?" she said quietly, but with a bitter, despairing edge in her voice. " You no longer try to hide your actions, judging by the Paris incident. Tell me, is the war so near that you can afford to be careless ? And Hargon," she went on scornfully, " you killed even the great Hargon of Vetliman !"

Lockhart's head was spinning. Apparently the girl did not approve of the things that had happened in Paris. Was the alien camp split into two opposing factions for some reason ? But why was she afraid of him without actually knowing him ? Did she think he was the stern impersonal type of authority, the alien equivalent of a policeman, perhaps ? There was one way of finding out.

Lockhart gestured towards the door. " Come outside," he said harshly.

She didn't speak. Her face had gone white and if Lockhart had not grabbed her arm she would have fallen. With a shock he realised that she was horribly and desperately afraid, afraid for her life. Nobody had ever looked that way at him before, and suddenly he could no longer stomach it. He would stop this senseless bluffing and tell the truth.

The girl was an alien, but her strong feelings about the war and the death of ' Hargon ' indicated a possible sympathy for the Human side. Softening his tone to what he hoped was one of reassurance, Lockhart began, " I won't hurt you. In fact, I'd like to help you if possible. I do not approve of the war, either, and I want to talk to you. Could we go somewhere less public . . . ? "

" You are . . . alone ? "

The girl's expression was less frightened, but a wariness, and a look almost of hope had come into her eyes. Suddenly, shockingly, she laughed.

" Alone," she repeated scornfully. " Alone, and without a Cloak. But he still wants to make a killing and gain promotion by an unarmed capture." She laughed again. " So he pretends to be on my side, pretends that he is opposed to the war, and that this, out of all the planets in the Galaxy, is the one world which must not be harmed. And he will expect me to believe him.

" The people, yes," she added vehemenantly. " But not the world. That is too valuable."

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"You don't understand," Lockhart began. "I am not—"

He broke off as her arm—which he was still gripping—tensed and she looked aside quickly. He caught the covert glance and half turned towards the door.

Her brother had arrived.

Lockhart could not believe that his appearance could mean danger. The get-up was too fantastic. Fawn sports coat, plum-coloured trousers, a green and gold cravat with a jewelled stick-pin and, carried negligently in the left hand, a silver-topped cane. As he stood in the entrance, dabbing daintily with a lace handkerchief at some imaginary perspiration on his pallid brow, a second complication occurred.

Professor Brian also arrived.

Kelly saw his sister in the same instant that the Professor saw Lockhart, but Kelly moved first. He came towards them at a dead run, and there was nothing at all effeminate about the look on his face.

Instinctively, Lockhart tightened his grip on the girl's arm. He felt her try to pull free, then heard her direct a few low, urgent syllables towards her rapidly approaching brother. He found his tongue again.

"Wait!" Lockhart said hastily. "I've got to talk to you. I'm a . . . a *native*—"

"Doctor!" Brian called suddenly, "*Look out!*"

When Kelly had shown no sign of going for a weapon—alien or otherwise—Lockhart had returned his attention to the girl. Her brother was small and slight, and no match for Lockhart physically. But he brought it back in time to see the innocent, silver-topped cane come apart to reveal a two-foot sliver of steel attached to the ornamental handle. The cane which had acted as a scabbard for the swordstick cracked viciously against Lockhart's wrist. Simultaneously, the blade flicked upwards and drove towards his throat.

Two things saved his life; his frantic attempt to twist aside and fend off the blade with his arm, and the two quickly spoken syllables from the girl which caused her brother to hesitate in mid-lunge. Lockhart's upflung arm deflected the blade from his throat, but there was a tearing, burning sensation in his right shoulder before he saw it withdrawn for a second—and lethal—attempt.

Evasive action was impossible to him; he could not take his eyes off that thin, wicked blade with the red streaks on its tip. Shock kept the pain from registering fully, and his only thought was a bemused observation that aliens were supposed to have ray-guns and not swordsticks. He was still gazing hypnotically at the point of the weapon when it dawned on him that it was not coming any nearer. Two big, boney hands were restraining the arm which held it, and Lockhart

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recognised the Professor's hands even before the other's strained and sweating face swam into his field of vision.

The struggle was brief, bitter and noisy. Kelly was doing a lot of swearing. Lockhart knew because some of it was in a peculiar type of English. Still with a strangely detached feeling about the whole thing, Lockhart saw the swordstick fall to the floor, and the girl close in on the struggling pair. He saw her fists thud into the Professor's back in a double kidney punch, then Brian was hunched forward and gasping painfully, and Kelly and his sister were gone.

Hedley appeared a few seconds later and bustled them outside, loudly proclaiming—for the benefit of the crowd—that they were going in search of a policeman. Back at the hotel, Lockhart dressed the punctured shoulder with the help of Carson. It was not a serious wound, and he hurried back to Hedley's room as quickly as possible to make his report.

". . . But didn't you try to follow them?" the agent was saying as Lockhart entered. His voice was scathing.

"She punched me in the kidneys," the Professor replied hotly. He added, "That's dangerous in a man of my age."

"Oh, skip it," Hedley said, noticing Lockhart. Before listening to his account of the conversation with the girl he asked curtly about the wound, and when Lockhart had finished the agent said shortly, "You did very well, Doctor."

He was quiet then, for a long time.

"Are you sure of your facts?" he finally said, addressing the Professor. "You positively identified the language spoken by the man?"

"He only spoke that particular form of English when he was—er—excited," Professor Brian answered. "The rest was unintelligible, but I heard enough to be sure. The swordstick, his dress, and his seeming effeminacy make it conclusive."

Turning to Lockhart, Hedley said drily, "You'll be glad to know that the Professor has tracked down our Mr. Kelly." His mouth quirked downwards as if fighting the urge to burst into laughter, or maybe profanity. "He is, or was, a native of England during the middle 1700's. What is more, he resided there *recently*, because the Professor assures me that his language shows no dilution by the colloquialisms of later periods, as would be the case if he had lived through those years."

Abruptly Hedley pushed himself from his chair and began pacing the room. He halted suddenly, and clenched his big fist over a brass knob on his bedstead. "What can we do? Where can we start?" he said dully. "Spacetravel was bad, but now we have time-travel to deal with as well.

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"Did those old men come from the stars, or from our own future, or both? And what part do they play in this? We now have proof that there are extra-terrestrial beings at present on Earth, but now we have to discover when as well as where they've come from."

The brass knob came away suddenly in his hand. Hedley gazed at it curiously for a moment. Absent-mindedly he added, "And, of course, why they're here."

To be continued

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

In next month's instalment of "Tourist Planet" events take a surprising turn and you will find that central character Dr. Lockhart is called upon for some practical skill as a physician he never expected—or hopes to accomplish. Unfortunately, this is the type of story that can so easily be spoiled for the reader by giving away the plot beforehand.

Dan Morgan has a longer than usual story in "The Whole Armour"; Arthur Sellings, who is now appearing fairly regularly in our pages, presents "Heritage," a story as enigmatic as its title; and George Longdon, Alan Barclay and Sydney J. Bounds will be present with shorter material as well as a Kenneth Johns article dealing with the coelacanth.

Story ratings for No. 49 were:

1. Who Speaks of Conquest? Part IV - - - Lan Wright
2. Birthright - - - - - - - - - - - John R. Day
3. (The Untouchables - - - - - - - Leslie Perri
   (Psyclops - - - - - - - - - - Brian W. Aldiss
4. The Masters - - - - - - - - Arthur Sellings
5. First Lesson - - - - - - - - - Sydney J. Bounds

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Author Richard Wilson was recently in London and this particular story is a legacy from that visit. Readers may not be surprised to learn that he is also a Press Service writer and has combined his two talents in quite an extraordinary approach to the alien visitation theme.

PRESS CONFERENCE

By Richard Wilson

Only a few reporters were in the White House press room when the girl came in with the daily calling list. It was before nine o'clock on a frosty March morning. The girl pinned the list to the cork-faced bulletin board, frowned at it, shrugged and then went back through the foyer to her desk in the Press Secretary's office.

The United Press man lifted himself, yawning, off the desktop where he had been sitting watching a news programme on the television set at the far end of the room. He took a pencil and a fold of copy paper

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from his pocket and prepared to jot down the more interesting names, if any, from the typewritten list of those who would be calling on the President that day.

His yawn evaporated as he read the list.

It said :

CALLING LIST

10.15 Senator Herbert Lehman, New York.
10.30 Mr. Walter Reuther, C.I.O.
11.00 Secretary of State.
Noon Budget Director.
12.30 Lunch.
1.30 Mr. Kjal, Mars.

Years of ingrained scepticism battled with the urge to spin into UP's private telephone booth and cry " Flash !" along the direct line to his office.

The scepticism won. He took down the list and studied that line. . . . 1.30 Mr. Kjal, Mars . . .

The typist had been known to make some real boners in her day. Maybe she had meant to type Hjalmar somebody, as in Hjalmar Schacht that one-time financial wizard of Hitler Germany. Or maybe it was Mars, Pennsylvania. There was a Mars in Pennsylvania, wasn't there ? Or it could be a man from the Mars candy bar people—the ones who made Milky Ways. Better check.

He went into the Press Secretary's office.

" This 1.30 appointment of the President's," he said. " How about that ? "

" What about it ?" asked the Press Secretary.

The UP man put the calling list on the desk.

" This Mars business," he said. " Is that a typographical error ?"

The Press Secretary looked at the list.

" No," he said.

" That's a straight answer, anyway," the reporter said. " Now would you care to elaborate ? "

" No," the Press Secretary said.

The UP man was exasperated. " Look," he said. " This could be the biggest story of the century, or it could be only as big as Aunt Emmy getting her foot caught in the screen door. Open up, will you ? "

" You know I wouldn't give you anything exclusive," the Press Secretary said. " What you know from me the other boys have to know, too."

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"I'm not asking for anything like that," the reporter said. "Just tell me this—or if you won't tell me, add it to the list, officially—when you say Mars do you mean Mars, Pennsylvania, or Mars the candy bar or Mars the planet?".

"I see your problem," the Press Secretary said. "Okay."

He took the list and inked in after Mars :

(The Planet).

He handed the list back to the UP man.

"This is the straight goods?"

"The straight goods," said the Press Secretary.

"Is that all you'll say now?"

"That's all."

"Okay. Thanks."

The UP man went back to the press room, walking casually.

The Associated Press reporter looked up from the other end of the room as he entered and asked :

"The calling list out yet?"

"I've got it," the UP man said carelessly.

"Okay, after you," said the AP.

The UP said "Right" and eased into his phone booth. He lifted the receiver and whispered into the mouthpiece :

"Bulletin."

"Go ahead."

"Dateline. The White House indicated today that the age of interplanetary travel has dawned. Paragraph.

"The sensational announcement was made in the most routine form possible. It appeared as a single line on the President's calling list, which is posted daily in the White House press room. The list shows the people who will call on the President in his office each day. Paragraph.

"Today it listed quote Mr. Kjal—K as in King, J as in Jerusalem, A as in Apple, L as in Liberty—comma, Mars. (That's Mars the planet, Mac. Got it? Okay). Unquote. The appointment was scheduled for 1.30 p.m.

"(Yeah, I know it's sensational. No, of course I'm not drunk. Yes, the Press Secretary confirmed it. Okay, make it a flash if you want to. Here's the rest. Hurry up, or the other guys'll get suspicious. Yes, it's a beat. You'll be two or three minutes ahead if you get it right out).

"Paragraph. A reporter checked with the President's Press Secretary and was told that no mistake had been made in the list. At the reporter's request he confirmed that the Mars referred to was the planet Mars, and not a town or a company of that name. Paragraph.

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"But the Press Secretary declined to elaborate. It was indicated that no further details would be available until the Martian had actually paid his call on the President . . ."

The UP man came out of the booth, perspiring. He lighted a cigarette and tacked the calling list back on the bulletin board as the AP man strode over.

"You've been up to something," the AP man said, "I can tell."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah—say, what is this?" the AP yelled. He pulled the list off the board. His cry brought over at a run the third wire service reporter, the man from International News Service. The INS grabbed at the calling list but missed. The AP held it over his head and scowled up at it.

"Mr. Kjal, Mars," he read. "What the hell?"

The INS peered up, too. "For crying out loud," he said.

"It's on the level," the UP said. "You needn't go running inside. He won't tell you any more than's right there on the list. You'd better phone it in. I did."

The AP lunged into his booth and yanked the receiver off the hook. "You'd cut your grandmother's throat if your desk needed a good homicide," he said to the UP. "Bulletin!" he yelled into the telephone.

The INS threw himself into his booth and cried "Flash!"

The UP went back into his. "Send over two or three more guys," he said to his desk. "We may need them. For your information, AP and INS have just started dictating. AP's is a bulletin. INS is flashing it."

It was lunchtime, but no one went out to lunch. The White House press room was crammed with frustrated reporters who had learned there was nothing they could do until 1.30.

They had bombarded the Press Secretary with questions, which were met by a series of "No comments." The Appointments Secretary wasn't seeing anyone. The Department of State said all information would have to come from the White House. The Department of Defence said the same. The Federal Communications Commission said it didn't know anything and sounded sulky.

The reporters sat around smoking nervously or making themselves lunch from the stock of cold cuts and beer in their private refrigerator, or watching television.

The set had been tuned to a channel where a commentator was talking speculatively about the story while showing photographic slides

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of Mars and waiting for the arrival of his special guest. Mr. Robert Willey, the noted rocket expert.

The White House regulars were playing their complicated stud poker game, High Low Low-Hole Card Wild, but they played without enthusiasm and continually looked at their wrist watches.

One-thirty was H hour. At 1.15 they sent out scouts to watch all entrances to the White House, to see how Mr. Kjal would arrive and what he looked like.

But by 1.35 there had been no sign of him and by 1.45 the reporters were in a state of fidgets. Their desks kept the phones ringing to ask if the Martian had arrived and all the reporters could say was that they didn't know. The Press Secretary was no help. He declined even to say whether Mr. Kjal had reached the White House. The most he would do was to refuse to deny, when asked, that the visitor was a Martian from Mars. This negative scrap of information was duly passed on to the reporters' respective desks, who only demanded more, no matter how trivial.

At 2.15 the Cuban Ambassador, who had been standing, ignored by the press, next to the huge round table in the foyer, was shown into the President's office.

Mr. Kjal had not come out in the usual way, if he had ever gone in.

The Press Secretary leaned back in his swivel chair and declined to say whether the Martian had left by a side entrance. Was he still in the White House as a guest maybe? No comment. What were Mr. Kjal's plans? No comment. Would he describe the caller? No. Had he, personally, seen Mr. Kjal? No comment. It was infuriating.

Would there be a statement? Yes, one was being prepared now; patience, boys, please.

Finally the girl came in with a mimeographed statement. The copies were torn out of her hands and a torrent of reporters hurled themselves through the door, into the foyer where the Cuban Ambassador, hoping to be interviewed, was forced to jump to a sofa to avoid being trampled on. The reporters surged into the press room and to the telephones, yelling like wild animals.

On their way to the phones the reporters had discovered that the statement consisted of just one sentence. It said merely that the President and Mr. Kjal had had a 40-minute conversation during which topics of mutual interest were discussed.

The statement was dictated to their desks by the reporters with what elaboration they could muster, and then the torrent was back in the

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Press Secretary's office. There would be no further statement today, he said.

"The lid is on, boys," he said. That meant there would be no more news of any kind from the White House, short of something transcendental.

Would the President have a statement at his press conference tomorrow?

That would be up to the President, the Press Secretary said.

Would the conference be held at the usual time?

Yes, at 10.30 a.m., in Old State.

There the matter had to rest overnight. Thousands of words flowed out over the news wires and over the radio waves and through television receivers, but ninety-five percent of them were speculation.

It was the biggest story since the discovery of the New World, but all the details could have been put into a thimble.

The auditorium in the Old State Department Building across from the White House was filled to the doors an hour before the scheduled time of the press conference. Every reporter with White House accreditation was there. So were scores of special correspondents for whom temporary cards had been issued and who had flown in from the north, south and west.

The three wire service correspondents were down front, in the first row of chairs. Close by were the men from the New York Times, the Washington Star, the Chicago Tribune, Reuters of London, Agence France Presse, and Tass.

There was a murmur of talk and a creaking of the wooden chairs as the reporters waited, impatiently. Even the most blasé of them might have admitted a tense excitement.

They watched the door the President would come through. He was late. His aides already were at their places at the front of the auditorium. Finally the President came in, alone.

He was smiling, but it was a subdued smile. He exchanged greetings with the three wire service correspondents and a few other reporters he knew by name.

The President waited quietly for the last of the talk to die away in the large auditorium. He took out a handkerchief and patted his head. He put the handkerchief away in an inside pocket, then adjusted the double-breasted suit.

When it was quiet the President whispered to an aide and received a sheet of paper.

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He said he had an announcement. There was a great rustle of paper as the reporters prepared to write down each word. Then, with a grin, the President announced the appointment of a new member of the Federal Reserve Board. There was a laugh, in which the President joined, and some of the reporters dutifully made notes.

The President handed the sheet of paper back to the aide and said that was all he had today. Were there any questions?

There was bedlam. The President smiled and shook his head and raised his arms to quiet the noise. He asked those who had questions to hold up their hands and said he would recognize them individually. He nodded first to the AP, who asked:

"Is it true, Mr. President, that you had a conference yesterday with a Mr. Kjal, a resident of Mars, the planet?"

The President, following custom in declining to permit direct quotation of his remarks, said Yes, and a very pleasant conversation, too.

The UP asked what language the conversation had been conducted in.

English, the President replied. Mr. Kjal spoke the language excellently.

The National Broadcasting Company asked if the President would repeat that pronunciation of the Martian's name.

The President did, saying the *k* was silent and the *j* was like the *j* in the French Jacques or Jean.

The INS asked for a description of the visitor.

The President said Mr. Kjal had asked not to be described and he would respect his wishes.

The Christian Science Monitor: "Is Mr. Kjal the representative of one race or nation on Mars, and if so how many nations are there?"

Mr. Kjal was the representative of the only race on Mars, the President replied, saying Mr. Kjal had full authority from his government to conduct the conference with the President.

The Washington Post: "Are the Martians friendly? Not warlike, that is?"

The President chuckled and said that Mr. Kjal was quite friendly.

The Chicago Tribune: "What form of government does Mars have? I mean, is it for instance a socialistic welfare state form of government?"

The President replied that the form of government was rather complex and could not be conveniently tagged with any one of the terms used on Earth.

The New York Times: "By what means did the Martian arrive and is he still on Earth?"

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The President said he was not at liberty to describe Mr. Kjal's means of transportation and added that the Martian had returned to his planet.

The New York Daily Mirror : " Did he arrive by flying saucer ?"

The President, amid laughter, replied that he could say flatly that Mr. Kjal had not arrived, or departed, by flying saucer. He added that he would entertain no further questions about the means of transportation.

Tass, the Soviet news agency : " Why did he choose the United States instead of the Soviet Union to visit ? Not that it isn't possible that the Martian hasn't already visited that great country, long before he came to Washington."

No comment, said the President.

The Atlanta Constitution : " Mr. President, I wonder if you would care to tell us, in your own words, the reasons behind the Martian's visit and what the meaning of it is, as you see it ?"

The President replied that the visit had been an extremely interesting experience and he was honoured to have been chosen by Mr. Kjal from among the Chief Executives of many great nations on Earth for the conversation they had had. But the President added that he would prefer not to discuss the matter philosophically ; only in a factual way.

The three wire service men were becoming restive. They did not want the story to become too complicated. It had to be dictated at top speed after the traditional race to the telephones when the press conference broke up, and they'd had just about enough to handle easily. They needed one or two more points cleared up first, though, and after a hurried conference among themselves the three shot up their hands simultaneously. The President recognized them in turn.

The AP : " Does the Martian plan another trip to Earth, and if so, when ?"

Mr. Kjal did not plan to return, nor did any other Martian expect to make the trip, as far as he knew, the President replied.

The INS : " Did Mr. Kjal say whether there were any other planets besides Mars and Earth that have intelligent life ?"

The President said that was a very good question but he regretted that the subject had not come up in his conversation with Mr. Kjal.

The UP : " Does Mr. Kjal's visit perhaps mean that the United States is closer to achieving interplanetary travel than most people realize ?"

No comment, the President said.

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The UP : " Let me put it another way, then. Would you say that one of the results of the visit was to help pave the way for peaceful relations between Earth and Mars when we eventually achieve interplanetary travel ?"

He would, the President said ; definitely.

The senior wire service correspondent cut through a sudden clamour of other questions from behind him to cry :

" Thank you, Mr. President !"

As always that was the signal that the conference had come to an end.

The three wire service men broke into a dead run for their telephones.

That was all the world ever learned officially about Mr. Kjal, the man from Mars. The newspapers, the broadcasters, the television stations and the magazines played the story, sensationally or factually, in accordance with their editorial policies. Many newspapers printed the transcript of the press conference in full, to show their readers exactly how the story had developed.

Dozens of " it was learned " or " sources close to the White House " stories appeared in print, but none was authoritative and no one outside the President's official family ever knew any more than the President had told the press that day.

It had been the truth, of course, as far as it went.

But the President had not told the reporters that the visit from Mr. Kjal had been a strangely spiritual experience. In fact, the President by revealing the exact nature of their encounter might have had his sanity questioned. And yet the visit could not have been ignored. The press, and through it the world, had to be told—but just so much.

That night, in the privacy of his study with his personal journal open on his desk, the President tried to reduce his experience to words. It was extremely difficult.

Mr. Kjal had materialized in this very room two nights ago, in the most reassuring way possible. He had sent a thought ahead of him, telling the President what he intended to do, and directed the President's eyes toward the wing chair beside the fireplace. Then, as the President watched, the chair shimmered as if momentarily obscured by haze and Mr. Kjal was sitting there, smiling.

The President found himself smiling, too. It was the friendliest imaginable kind of meeting—no fear or doubt marred it and there they had talked, for four hours, like two old friends.

Their talk had been of everything and nothing. They spoke of the President's deep concern that the Earth might again be torn by war

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despite the hopes of its people for lasting peace. They spoke of hunger and disease and of personal insecurity. They spoke of childhood.

The President recalled a tranquil time when he had fished in a country brook with a golden-haired collie sitting tall beside him on the bank. And Mr. Kjal spoke of his childhood, too, in such a familiar way that the President felt that his visitor might have been a boy from the next town when he had fished the brook and that if he had gone upstream they might have met.

No, he could not have described the conversation to the reporters. He had explained this to Mr. Kjal and the Martian himself had suggested that he make an appearance in the President's executive office the next day so he could say truthfully that Mr. Kjal had been a White House caller in the accepted sense of the term.

The President, seeking the right words for his private journal, recalled an article in which the dean of a divinity school theorized that beings of other worlds might have supernatural gifts—which would have explained, theologically, Mr. Kjal's mysterious journey from Mars. The supernatural had no need of space ships. But the public did, if it was to accept Mr. Kjal at all.

The President thought then of the growing public belief that travel to Mars and other worlds was to be possible. But what strange forms limited imaginations had assigned to these men from Mars! How far from the mark they had been.

They had visualized semi-monsters instead of semi-gods.

He doubted if the reporters would have swallowed that one without considerable carrying on.

And how could the President have replied to the question put to him by the reporter from the Atlanta Constitution?

He could have said that since Earth had directed its attention to Mars and the conquest of the space between the planets a need had arisen for mankind to be worthy of that conquest. That Mr. Kjal was the embodiment of that need. That the greedy, belligerent, precocious infant Earth was on the path to the stars—a path bordered with things of beauty and fragility. That only a well-adjusted, mature Earth could be permitted to travel that path, as a friendly, curious creature in a new world—a humble creature willing to be shown the way.

But not a destroyer. A destroyer would have to be destroyed.

The President could picture the headlines this would have evoked: "Earth Gets Martian Ultimatum!"

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No, he had said enough to the reporters.

Now the details of the Martian's visit were beginning to blur in his mind, desperately as he tried to retain them. But he knew this—because of the visit he would be a wiser man and through the great power of his office the world would be a better place.

The President mused for a time longer and then he wrote in his journal. There didn't seem to be much to put down, now.

He wrote only this :

" Had a pleasant meeting with Mr. Kjal, of Mars. He is a fine, sincere man who represents a learned, peaceful people. He has returned home and said he would not come again. We will see him again, one day, but only when our people have the knowledge to permit us to travel to his land.

" It is my fervent wish that when that time comes we will be as spiritually advanced as we are scientifically and that the people of our world will live peaceably and profitably in communion with the people of his world.

" Mr. Kjal thought that everything would work out all right."

Richard Wilson

"Gone Away—No known address"

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us know in good time.

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PERIOD OF ERROR

Since its development early in the 1939-45 war, Radar has continued to advance with enormous strides, although the factor of human error is ever present. How near will radar get to the prediction in this story—where human fallibility is eradicated?

By George Longdon

Illustrated by HUTCHINGS

Jack Bennett lifted his brows and moved the phone to almost arm's length. "Yes, sir. The system is completed, all work finished."

"And time too!" The voice was still almost too loud for comfort. "When I was a young man of your rank, Captain, I would not have permitted such delay!"

Jack did not point out that becoming General had not increased Farram's tolerance or improved his temper. Instead, he waited until the irate tones ceased.

"The whole system is very complex, General Farram." He schooled his voice to a mildness he did not feel. "The northmost station has new radar devices no one can jam and is the most efficient in the world—"

"It should, considering the money spent!" Farram rapped.

Jack sighed, his lips twitching. Farram seldom let a subordinate complete a sentence, and Jack felt that one day things would become unendurable, his pent resentment boil over, and pop would go his three captain's stars.

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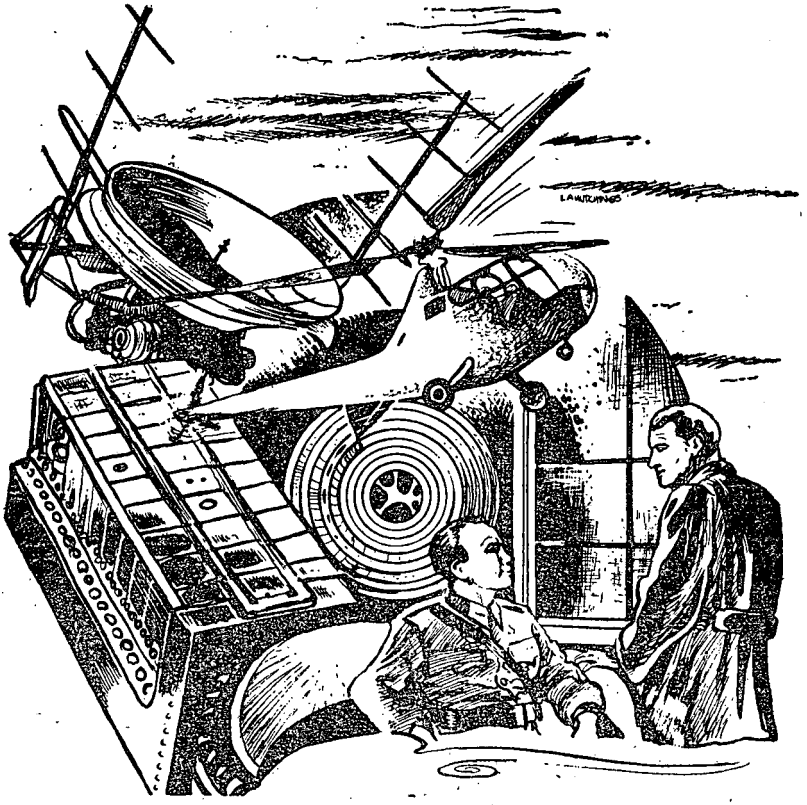

" My report will have to be made within three days, at the most," General Farram was saying. " It will not be favourable unless I am convinced !" The phone diaphragm shook with ire. " Is Major Cornforth there ?"

" No, sir. He's out in a helicopter making personal checks."

" Then tell him to call me immediately he is back !"

The line went dead and Jack cradled the phone, lips compressed. General Farram understood none of the intricacies of the Cornforth System of Distant Enemy Warning radar, and his calls to the DEW headquarters had become increasingly frequent and irritating.

Jack leant over his desk and pressed a button. " If Major Cornforth comes in will you say I'd like to see him."

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"Yes, sir."

"And if General Farram rings, say I've gone to inspect the station."

"I will, sir." The girl's voice carried understanding.

It was two hours flight to the DEW equipment site, Jack reflected, and wondered if he should wait until Cornforth came in. The office window overlooked the distant airfield from which the Major's helicopter had spun off into the clear northern sky, but there was no hint of his early return. Allowing two hours each way, and two to inspect the equipment, he should be back quite soon, Jack decided.

He watched a few moments, then went along a corridor to the other wing of the building. Five years in construction, it had matched the slow rising of the lattice radar towers straddling the Springpark site four hundred miles to the north. In polar regions, swept by blizzard and snow, the site had been named in jest by a wit unknown. Apt because opposite, it stuck.

Remy Johnson was sitting idly on a green-topped mushroom stool, but straightened up as Jack entered. Jack's nostrils twitched but he did not point out that a Signals Sergeant was not supposed to smoke on duty.

"Had any message from Springpark, sergeant?"

Johnson shook his head. Young, he looked intelligent but bored. "I understood all personnel had been cleared, now everything is finished, sir."

"They have. But I wondered if the Major had signalled."

Johnson tapped the message records. "There's been nothing from Springpark in twenty-four hours."

Jack left him. After five years of rush, a relaxing calm had come, broken only by the irascible Farram. All the scanning, pulse generating and receiving equipment was at the far away site, but radio links extended to the headquarters building, and no one need stay at Springpark. He would wait half an hour, then set out, if Cornforth was not back, Jack decided. It would be both his duty and satisfaction to view the completed station.

He spent the time sorting his reports into order, ready for General Farram's eagle eyes. With minutes to spare he mused over the chart that showed the line of remote towers, from which would radiate a matrix of radar no enemy could avoid. The Cornforth System was both highly complex and top secret, and Jack doubted if anyone living except Major Cornforth himself understood it as a whole. Many technicians had been involved, but the work had been in sections, one group not knowing what the others were doing. The expense had been vast—on that point he could agree with Farram. No man with

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a reputation lesser than Cornforth's would have gained permission to spend so much.

The thirty minutes had just gone when a whine began somewhere in the building, grew to a screech, and stayed there. Jack rose so quickly his chair fell over, unnoticed. Someone was running, feet pounding. Nerves twanging with shock, and the unearthly screech, Jack raced for the radio wing, thoughts a bedlam of astonishment. *A general warning from DEW* !

Remy Johnson had lost his colour. A single screen on the wall lit and faded rhythmically. Its name plate stated *General Warning*. Johnson's gaze flashed to it, and back.

" It—it can't be enemy planes, sir !"

No, Jack thought, it couldn't. The line of stations had been erected as a future safeguard, not because of an immediate threat. His eyes fled over the glowing screen, the others, dead silver, and the mass of indicators, markers and pointers.

" Don't you know exactly what it means ? "

Johnson gestured helplessly. " No, sir ! The trained radar watch was beginning tomorrow. All I know is what it says—*General Warning*."

" You can't be more exact ?" Jack snapped.

" No, sir." The Signals Sergeant chewed a lip. " Could it be Major Cornforth flying by the stations to test them ?"

" He'd not do that without advising us !" No-one in their senses would initiate a General Warning, Jack thought. It would automatically alert defence projectile stations throughout the country. Men would be swarming to predictors and launching units, eyes turned skywards. In terms of man-hours, alarm and expense, a pointless General Alarm probably was as wasteful as the loss of a major aircraft carrier at sea, with all personnel and equipment.

The sounds of running were converging on the radio room. Jack went out as the main rush of staff, officials and technicians arrived. There was one thing to do, he thought as he hurried out—take a helicopter to Springpark and see what happened !

Radar masts appeared slowly in the greyness ahead, gaunt and black on the white plain, and Jack took the helicopter skimming down to reduced altitude. Whorls of powdery snow raced on the wind across the icy wilderness, but no human was visible, nor any plane that could have tripped a warning.

Jack set the machine down a hundred yards from a steel lattice tower, and threw open the cockpit cover. Cold wind struck his cheeks, plucked at his dark hair, and he hastily drew up the hood of his fleece-

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lined suit. He stood up, surveyed the scene to the limit of visibility, and depressed the panel radio call button.

"Captain Bennett reporting from the Springpark site. There is no sign of Major Cornforth, his machine, or anyone else. Did you get a warning of my approach?"

"Yes, sir." Remy Johnson sounded fully awake now. "On one of the directive screens. I've been watching for it."

"Good. I'll call if anything arises."

Wind shook the helicopter fiercely as Jack got out. The moment the General Warning had sounded he had felt it did not indicate enemy craft, but some totally unexpected fault in the equipment. Major Cornforth would probably know what to suspect, he thought.

Ankle deep in snow, he squinted up at the radar mast. Eleven metre antennae topped it, radiating a modulated pulse no anti-radar jamming device could deceive. Lower were the centimetre directive parabolics that twirled ceaselessly upon a vertical axis, exactly tracking any object from horizon to zenith. On side members projecting from the mast stood other aerials, odd in shape and the subjects of special care by Cornforth, Jack remembered. A gust struck him, almost tilting him off balance, and snow stung his eyes. He pulled goggles down off the hood, and plunged through the white dunes to the reinforced steel dome that covered the station entrance.

The recessed door had a palm lock responding only to Cornforth, himself, and two senior headquarters staff. Inside, he watched it close with a whirr, and the icy blast was excluded. Steps descended from the tiny metal igloo, terminating in a corridor off which branched several chambers housing pulse generators, receivers, and robot equipment. Jack had never pretended to understand some of the units, especially those Cornforth had personally supervised. But one room contained rows of meters and indicators designed to show any fault anywhere in the whole installation. He checked them systematically. All was in order.

Nearly an hour had passed when he left, sealing the door. The wind had risen slightly, but the snow had ceased, leaving a clear view over the frozen wastelands around. He hesitated, his dark brows drawn down and his lips twitching. He could only assume some unknown fault had arisen, then cleared itself.

Out in the open the wind was strong. He ran to the helicopter, ducked under its flapping blades, and gained the cockpit. The panel radio indicator was at red and he pressed the button.

"Captain Bennett speaking."

"I've been trying to get you for ten minutes, sir—"

Jack wondered at the note in young Remy Johnson's voice. "Yes?"

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"A foot patrol reported seeing a crashed helicopter. He is trying to reach it but says it will take hours, so radioed for aid. We've sent out a machine, but the crash is quite near you."

Jack operated the motor starter. *Major Cornforth*, he thought. "Give me the co-ordinates!"

He noted them down even as the craft began to rise. Thirty miles from the Springpark site, but over three-hundred and eighty from headquarters. He would undoubtedly reach the crashed machine first.

The map references indicated a point a little off the direct route, where the ground became broken and began to rise in hills that joined low mountains many miles east. He guessed the foot patrol had been on the hills, and had possibly observed the crashed machine across several miles of almost impassable terrain.

The helicopter lay upside down, crumpled rotors pressed into the frozen snow and fuselage poised oddly on a twisted shaft. Jack circled, his machine bucking from the spinning upcurrents of the hillside, and found a flat a trifle lower. Wheels and struts sank deep, but the craft rested firm.

As he walked to the inverted machine, feet crackling through frozen snow, deep lines grew upon his youthful face and he felt a sudden responsibility almost more than his thirty-odd years could bear. Major Cornforth lay on his back under one of the rotor blades, hat gone from his sandy hair, blue eyes open but unseeing, a look of astonishment on his pleasant face. His hands, face and body were icy cold.

Jack drew on his gauntlet. He could not lift the rotor, and hours had passed since Cornforth had died. Back in his own machine he radioed the headquarters building.

"The Major is dead. I don't know whether he crashed, and was thrown out. Or whether his machine developed a fault, so that he came down, and the wind overturned it on top of him. As he was off course the craft was probably faulty." He waited acknowledgement. "You'll send a rescue squad right away? I'm coming back."

He sat gazing moodily at the upturned helicopter, his own machine quivering each time the wind struck it. The integrating mind behind the Cornforth System was no more. He wished the Major had not exercised care almost to the point of being secretive.

When a heavy drone grew in the sky and a large machine sloped steeply for the hillside, he jerked shut the cockpit cover and took the single-seater up at a speed that left a trail of settling snow in his wake. The hills fringing the Springpark site began to dwindle rapidly behind.

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A striped, two-rotor craft Jack did not recognise stood outside the headquarters building. Inside, the desk girl looked pale in her spruce grey uniform.

"General Farram is waiting for you in your office, sir," she said.

Jack noted the quiver in her voice as he nodded and went up. A subdued silence had invaded the building. Jack tapped on his door and entered. Farram sat behind the desk, mighty in the chair Jack found amply large for his own sparse frame. The General's dark, wild hair stood in disorder, his face was red, his brow scarlet, and his eyes fierce.

"I have had to wait, Captain Bennett!" he stated irritably.

Jack felt his lips twitch, but held his features resolutely wooden. "I've been out to the DEW site, sir."

"Then perhaps you can explain this disgraceful General Warning!" Farram snapped. "In thirty years as a soldier I've never experienced its like."

"Apparently there was some error—some fault in the equipment, sir."

General Farram shook as with pent wrath. "Then that in itself is a condemnation of the whole system! You alert the whole military and air forces, then suggest it's a minor fault—"

Jack felt colour in his cheeks. "The equipment is automatic, sir. There is only robot apparatus, designed to work without attention."

"And to raise a warning when there is none?" Farram demanded.

"No, sir!" Jack stood woodenly. "The system was only just beginning to function. Much equipment needs adjustment at first—there is an initial period of error."

"Which you have located and corrected?"

Jack looked at his shoes. "No, sir."

"Ah!" Triumph and anger blended. Farram rose precipitantly and stabbed the papers on the desk with a finger. "I was against the whole idea from the beginning, on the ground of unjustified expense, and Major Cornforth knew it."

Jack met the other's wrathful gaze. "The Major is dead, sir."

"So I have been informed! That is why I now regard the whole system as being your responsibility, Captain! I expect it to work correctly and in a reliable manner. It will be my duty to present a report to my superiors."

Farram walked to the door, halting with his thick brows twitching. "Your future career in the Service will depend on my words, Captain Bennett."

Jack ignored the almost deliberate provocation of tone. "I always carry through tasks set me, sir."

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The door banged. Alone, Jack half unconsciously ran fingers over his three gold stars. As Farram said, it would look bad if the Springpark work proved a fiasco. The total expense had reached eight figures, and the high brass obviously expected value.

He sat on the edge of his desk, frowning. The Springpark venture had its unknown quantities, dreamt up by Major Cornforth, built by technicians who never saw the whole, and too complex for easy analysis. Upon them the fall of the three gold stars might depend. But one thing Jack knew—Cornforth was sure the radar equipment was the best in the world, and his fifty years of technological reputation had stood behind every smallest part.

Jack had been pondering on his notes for an hour when the desk buzzer sounded. He pressed the button.

"Captain Bennett here."

"A Miss Cornforth is asking to see you, sir."

Jack frowned. "I know no one that name."

"Major Cornforth's daughter, sir. She says she is sure you will see her."

Silent, Jack tried to recall any mention of a daughter, but failed. The Major had lived far away, arriving by helicopter daily. He had never talked of personal matters, Jack remembered.

"Very well," he said. "Show her up."

The newcomer had her father's kindly features, but his sandy hair had emerged as light gold. Moderate in build, she could not be over twenty-five, and had a swiftly expressive face that smiled fleetingly.

Jack expressed his sorrow and found blue eyes the image of the Major's fixed on him. "Father believed in this radar system, Captain Bennett. If it fails, his reputation is ruined. I have heard there was trouble—"

"A warning of approaching craft when there was none."

"So I gathered." She nodded slowly. "Father talked about Springpark sometimes. I believe there were radar devices which had never previously been used. Father had studied radar systems all his life, and done original work."

Moved by her intensity, Jack was silent. If Farram blew the whole scheme up, Cornforth's reputation would join the dust.

The clear blue eyes remained on him. "If I can help, I wish to. Father didn't put much on paper, or destroyed what he wrote, but there are a few notes. I—I have a Degree in communications technology, and can go over the systems step by step in the light of what my father told me, though that's not much."

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Lack of complete knowledge of the Cornforth System *was* hindering, Jack reflected. The Major had been almost secretive, for security reasons.

As time passed he knew that his first impression of Susie Cornforth had not been mistaken. Her quick intelligence quite matched his own, he admitted, and he grew to look for the abrupt jerk of her head that meant she understood. The centimetre directive radar was standard practice, and presented no difficulty. The short wave modulated system proved only a little more awkward.

" Father's plan was that the modulation prevents jamming by anti-radar devices," Susie Cornforth said, golden head bent over the block plans. " A jamming transmitter cannot produce a modulation which must vary in a specific but unpredictable manner. Any dissimilarity between the received and transmitter signal would trigger a warning."

Jack scratched his dark head. Four hours had drained him, but left the girl as fresh as when she entered. " Could it be that which initiated the General Warning ? "

" No." The close gold curls shook a quick negative. " It could only happen if an enemy or jamming station were in action. We know that isn't so."

Only the third set of equipment remained. It occupied space equalling both Eleven-Metre and centimetre directive apparatus. Susie Cornforth studied plans of the side aerials on the Springpark towers.

" This was Father's pride, and the real heart of the Cornforth System," she said pensively. " Also the part he talked least about. I remember him chuckling and telling me no enemy craft would evade giving ample warning if they came within five hundred miles of it, if they tried from now till Domesday."

" If the other equipment is in order, presumably that is." Jack felt tired.

Her blue eyes met his quickly. " You're still looking for a—*fault* ? "

" Of course. There was a warning with no planes."

Half an hour later she left. Jack had coffee, put his feet on the desk for twenty minutes, then sat up to write his report for Farram. In it he expressed confidence in the whole Springpark system, said no fault could be located, gave it as his opinion that all was in order, and concluded by stating he considered the whole network of radar stations now fully operative. Signed and sealed, he delivered it into the hands of an orderly for immediate dispatch to General Farram, and felt more at ease. Susie Cornforth should not feel that her father was to be made ridiculous.

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He stretched, standing at the window. The long evening of such latitudes was near and he felt rest would be welcomed and justified. He had just locked his desk when a bleating, wailing sound awoke in the building. He froze, mouth open. Within a moment his desk phone was buzzing. He snatched it up.

"Duty radio operator here. Is that Captain Bennett?"

"It is!" Jack noted the breathlessness of the operator's voice.

"It's a General Warning from the Springpark station, sir!"

Jack groaned, his heart lead. "I'm coming!" He banged the phone down and pressed a stud for the entrace office. "Is the messenger who just took a report from me there? If so, stop him!"

A delay, then: "He's gone, sir."

Jack released the button and his lips set. The simultaneous arrival of the report and new alert would act on Farram like the approach of a match to gunpowder!

A new radio man was in the radio room, but clearly as helpless as Remy Johnson. His face was pale and his eyes uneasy.

"General Farram left instructions you were to be informed, sir," he said. "He has been rather—*displeased*, sir."

Jack looked at the blinking screen. "If he reprimands you try to point out that Major Cornforth died without explaining the overall working of the system to us, or refer him to me."

The man appeared doubtful. Farram was not the kind of superior with whom it was easy to discuss difficulties. The beeping in his ears, Jack wished the screen listings were more detailed. The general warning did not even give a directive bearing on the craft or planes—he stopped himself abruptly: there were no planes, only an error!

"I'm going out to look again!" he snapped.

As he ran from the building he was aware of lighter steps following.

"Captain Bennett! Can I come?"

He halted, saw it was Susie Cornforth, and nodded. "The helicopter can carry two easily. Get a polar suit from stores—the DEW site is no picnic!"

She was back, dragging the zip to her throat, almost as soon as he had started the motor. She jabbed her curls under the fleecy cap, lowering herself into the second seat. She pointed.

"Someone wants you!"

From the corner of his eye Jack saw General Farram burst from the main doors, bare-headed, face thunderous. Jack operated the controls and the helicopter bounced for the sky.

"I haven't seen anyone!" he said.

He put the craft upon the course he had flown so many times before, but never so urgently. Springpark, four hundred miles and two hours

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away, held some mystery likely to ruin both Cornforth's reputation and his own career, unless it could be found quickly.

Signs of civilisation drifted behind, growing less frequent, and the greyish-white of skies over ice and snow began to appear ahead. Susie Cornforth did not speak, and when he looked at her she was frowning.

The radar towers stood like tall metal skeletons in the dim light. The wind had gone, leaving a white, crisp stillness, and stars shone bright and near. Frozen snow crunched under their feet and glistened on the dome. Jack opened the door, entered, and put on the fluorescents.

"Both the eleven and centimetre equipment would give directive indications," Susie Cornforth said as she descended the narrow metal steps. "As no directive reading was given it must be Father's special apparatus."

Which reduced chances of finding any fault to about one in a hundred, Jack thought. He opened the door of the indicator room.

"If anything is wrong we should spot it."

Over half the meters were associated with the special equipment, and all stood at marked readings showing correct operation. So did those wired to the remaining two smaller sets of apparatus. Jack scowled at the steady pointers.

"Nothing is wrong—but it doesn't work as we expect!"

Her gaze travelled over the rows of dials. "Perhaps it is working *as Father would expect.*"

Jack frowned. Some obvious fault could be corrected—but this was baffling.

A thunderous hammering shook the main entrance door, ceased, then began again. Susie Cornforth grimaced.

"Perhaps someone you didn't see saw you!" she murmured.

The banging *did* have the sound of authority, Jack thought. When he unfastened the door, a scarlet face under dark, wild hair confronted him.

"Your ghost planes over again, Bennett?" Farram snapped.

Jack let him enter and closed the door. "We miss Major Cornforth's assistance, sir. Part of the equipment was designed by him, and it is there the trouble arises."

The metal steps thudded under General Farram's angry descent. "Three alarms—there was another soon after you left! Have you any idea what that means in terms of wasted money and time?" He snorted. "I know of no other project so expensive, troublesome, and useless!" A contemptuous glance swept the lit corridors. "Waste on such a vast scale is serious, Captain Bennett."

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Jack held his breath, lips twitching, and suppressed the urge to point out that DEW, by its very complexity, made a quick solution impossible. Instead, he opened the meter room door.

" Miss Cornforth, sir. We hope she may help us gain a full understanding of Major Cornforth's equipment."

Farram grunted recognition. His eyes swept the meters and his face adopted the expression of a child confronted by the inside of a tri-colour video set.

Jack indicated some of the meters quickly. " Each pointer shows voltage and current readings and has to lie on the green sector, sir. A fault would change readings, and the meters show where the fault lies."

Glaring under mobile brows, Farram studied them systematically. Jack waited, avoiding Susie's eye, until the silence was impossible.

" All are in order, sir."

" *In order* !" Ire shook the General's tall, wide frame. " You say that—after three false warnings—"

" I mean the readings are in order, sir !" Jack corrected quickly. " We suspect the special equipment, because of no directive reading."

Farram abandoned the dials. " Show it me !"

Jack did. Oil-cooled thyratrons flanked the walls, topping pulse-delay and synchronising equipment. To one side was apparatus Jack could not name, as it had been Major Cornforth's special concern. In the next room Farram glared at the centimetre magnetron valves and anti-jamming modulator.

" Ten million pounds of rubbish !" he stated.

Jack let it pass. Farram ascended to the dome, and they followed, silent. There, the General halted.

" Your whole system is useless, Captain Bennett ! It is an abominable waste of Military funds, manpower, and time ! When I send in my report in two days time I shall make a point of condemning it in the strongest terms !"

Jack saw Susie Cornforth's cheeks grow pale. " You will close the station—and ruin my Father's reputation, General Farram ?"

Thick brows twitched at the tone. " Probably, Miss Cornforth. Facts are facts. The system is useless. I shall be just, but do what is my duty !" He halted, hand on the open door. " A warning device that cries *Wolf* where there is none is worse than useless ! I shall at once instruct that no further warning from the system be acted upon !"

" Which is about the end of Father's reputation—and mine," Susie Cornforth said as the General stamped away across the snow to where his pilot had come to attention.

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Jack gazed at the sullen, silent sky, devoid of any aircraft. The normal centimetre radar had a range of hundreds of miles and would have disclosed the presence of even the smallest robot or single-seater plane. He frowned, watching the helicopter gain altitude.

"My own name will be mud when General Farram's report goes in. If we're to make anything of this it will only be by systematic investigation from bedrock."

Fleeting gratitude was followed by doubt on her face. "If we knew more—had a clue—"

"We must look for clues!" Decision brought a snap to his voice. In addition to saving the Cornforth name, and himself, would be the added pleasure of proving Farram wrong, Jack thought.

They spent another hour studying the equipment, and Jack was, as always, impressed by its quality, precision, and scientific craftsmanship. As they left Susie Cornforth summed up his unexpressed opinion.

"I don't believe there's anything wrong with it!" she said.

Starlight and a half moon shone on the frozen snow. The Springpark site drifted behind, the helicopter gaining speed. Only once below did Jack see movement, a motor-sledge with a single man camped beside it. Tired, he decided sleep would have to come before investigation.

He rose long before dawn, much refreshed, and was in his office early. Years of working under the technical guidance of Major Cornforth had left a feeling of reliance upon the Major's decisions. As his daughter said, the Springpark Distant Enemy Warning system should be faultless, if brains and money unsparingly expended gave perfection.

Elbows on desk and chin on hands, Jack pondered. Assuming the equipment to be faulty led nowhere, because no defect could be discovered. Investigation on other lines might help, he decided. Only one other assumption remained: the system was giving warning of some causative agent so far unnoticed by Farram, himself, Susie, and the staff. After much thought he phoned the main airfield adjacent to Farram's H.Q., and contacted the meteorological officer.

"This is Captain Bennett at DEW headquarters building."

"Yes?" The voice suggested three fake warnings had not been without impact.

"I am looking for any possible external cause which might influence a new radar installation."

"Yes, Captain?" The tone proved things had happened at the airfield during the warnings. "Such as what?"

Jack carefully considered his mental list. "Unusually large meteorites. Ionisation of the atmosphere due to aurora borealis or other

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effects. Unusual storms. Migratory birds. Reflection from a moving wind front, or any other cause."

He heard the officer contacting other personnel. As he waited his desk communicator buzzed and he depressed the button.

"Miss Cornforth wishes to see you, sir."

"Send her up."

The meteorological officer was talking when she came in. There had been no report of any unusual weather, meteorite showers, or other abnormal conditions. Jack thanked the officer and rang off.

"It seemed worth trying." He realised the words were an excuse for his failure to save Susie's name. "I thought some special set of conditions might have triggered your father's equipment."

She stood by the window, gold hair almost silvery in the cold light. "I've spent hours studying Father's diaries and notes, but haven't got anywhere." She placed two little black books on the desks. "These are the only ones he kept since working on the DEW project."

Jack flipped through them, reading chance phrases. Most were records of progress; some were personal notes; others meant little. He leaned back heavily in his chair.

"The whole thing's baffling. The alarm sounds three times. We dash out there at once. Admittedly it's a two hour journey, but there's no sign of any possible cause. A craft within hundreds of miles would be tracked by the centimetre directive equipment, and its bearing and distance shown. Nothing has ever shown on the directive screens except our own helicopters, and the radar watch officer has observed us arrive and leave. The devil is, that your father's special apparatus gives no indication at all of range and bearing."

"That is a grave weakness," Susie Cornforth admitted. "Yet it was in that part of the equipment that Father's main pride was, as I told you. He often said it was the heart of the Cornforth System."

The desk phone silenced Jack's reply. He lifted it. "Captain Bennett here."

"This is General Farram!"

Jack hastily removed the receiver from near his ear. "Yes, sir?"

"You will remember my report has to be in during the next twenty-four hours. I assume you have still failed to correct the errors in the Springpark equipment?"

Colour came to Jack's cheeks and his lips twitched. "There has been little time, sir! The equipment was built separately in sections, for security reasons, and no man except Major Cornforth clearly understands the whole. I would like at least a month—"

"You cannot have a month!" Irritation vibrated the diaphragm. "You have been employed on the project since its beginning, and

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should be familiar with it ! The system fails, yet you cannot explain why—a fact not likely to inspire confidence in your ability, Captain Bennett, you will agree !"

Jack shut his lips determinedly. To blow up now would lose any thousandth chance of saving the Cornforth name.

" No, sir," he said flatly.

" Your failure will of necessity have to be included in my report !"

The line went dead and Jack swore long and with feeling. Farram's decision was justified, he supposed, even if his manner with subordinates was not.

Susie Cornforth had obviously heard both sides of the phone conversation. A frown marked her clear forehead, and her close curls tossed.

" Twenty-four hours to prove Father was not a crank !" she said bitterly. " If we fail, what will they do ?"

" Send personnel elsewhere. Dismantle everything and sell it as scrap. General Farram never liked the scheme and will be glad to demonstrate how right he was !"

They studied the plans and diary notes until noon. Many had been intended for no other eyes and were frequently scanty or unintelligible. As he prepared to leave for a break Jack pointed out a recent entry : " Try to make directive. Ignore warning flying time from DEW."

Susie Cornforth read it and shook her head. " I fear we're beaten. We haven't even located some defect we could promise to put right."

Her eyes were tired, her face sad. Jack wondered if she had slept at all the previous night. As with the untiring Major, she had appeared to forget time and fatigue, but now certain defeat emphasised both. He pressed her arm momentarily at the door.

" I'm sorry."

She smiled fleetingly, a bare movement of the lips, and was gone. Jack ate in the building canteen, following with strong coffee as he reviewed yet again all he knew of the Springpark project. Cornforth System, and three fake General Warnings. The Major had been a technician of the highest ability and was wholly confident in his system. " No planes will get by if they try till Doomsday," he had said. That suggested he believed DEW was *perfect*. Assume the Major, never given to exaggeration, was correct, Jack thought. What constituted a perfect radar system ? Equipment no known anti-radar device could jam—the eleven metre apparatus. Second, units giving exact bearings and distance—the centimetre directives. Both sets of equipment were known and predictable, but still remained the special apparatus, larger than either.

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Jack gave it up and left the canteen. Not even a stray flock of birds, or brace of meteorites to explain it, he thought. Just the warning. Then he jumped into the 'copter, flew there, and found nothing. He frowned, something nagging at his mind. Cornforth was not a crank. Therefore behind it all lay some perfectly logical explanation. A jigsaw puzzle was also logical, he thought as he went to his office. Each piece fitted—when one knew where.

Farram stood outlined against the window like a shadowy giant. A large envelope under one uniformed arm was undoubtedly the report, devastating in its acid exasperation.

Jack saluted, mind still on the problem. Three warnings. Three flights to Springpark. One notebook was still open on the desk. "Try to make directive. Ignore warning flying time from DEW." None of Cornforth's notes were pointless scribbles. The note must refer to the special system equipment, since only that was undirective. Cornforth had wanted to make the system directive, but apparently failed. Meanwhile, the second sentence seemed to be a caution. *Ignore warning flying time from DEW.* Jack repeated it and felt inspiration leap within him. *Indeed the perfect radar system!*

"My report is completed!" Farram said tartly.

Jack regained awareness of the room. The perfect system, he thought jubilantly. One so effective it could give a general warning two hours before the event! It knew in advance—was predictive!

A light tap came on the door and Susie Cornforth entered. Her gaze went from Jack to Farram and the greeting in her eyes died. Jack faced Farram over the desk.

"I have good reason to believe the Cornforth System is faultless, sir, and has to date given no incorrect result."

The General seemed to increase in width against the back lighting. "*Three* fake warnings—and you call that no error!"

"I do! Or any error present was in interpretation, not in the equipment!"

Farram swelled with anger. "Ridiculous—"

"Not at all!" Jack felt pleasure in cutting him short. "Major Cornforth made his system *able to predict.* It looks ahead two hours. Each warning had been of a helicopter's arrival at the Springpark site, two hours flying time away. The Cornforth System looks ahead through time. Hence his secrecy. Eventually we shall find how it works. Until then, we can use the system as it stands."

Farram's shoulders visibly shook with anger. "You expect me to believe we were having a radar warning of your approach before you had actually taken off!"

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"That makes no difference! The helicopter was going to arrive there in two hours, and the warning was given. Major Cornforth knew the flying time from here about equalled the predictability period of his equipment, and wrote this, doubtless to be incorporated in instructions." Jack indicated the diary.

As General Farram read, Susie Cornforth moved near Jack. "It fits," she whispered. "Father once said he believed radar waves could be propagated into the future, over a short period—"

"Two hours," Jack said.

A wailing silenced him, howling and screeching from somewhere in the building. Farram banged the diary on the desk.

"The General Warning, Bennett!" he snapped. "That proves you wrong! Knowing what you do, you won't at once fly to investigate! There won't be any plane near Springpark today, nor any other day, when my report goes in—"

Jack moved to the window, the wail ringing in his ears. A striped two-rotor craft was just taking off. A step took him to the desk communicator.

"Give me the duty officer!"

Time lapsed, then: "Yes, sir?"

"Who just left in a helicopter—General Farram's, I think?"

"His pilot, sir. General Farram left instructions it was to fly out to Springpark to fetch an officer I understand went out by sledge to watch for planes."

"Thanks."

Jack released the button and saw that Farram had heard every word. His brows twitched, his crimson cheeks shook, and he gulped audibly.

"I—I will delay my report, Captain Bennett," he said.

Jack knew it was the nearest Farram would ever get to an apology. He opened the door, and closed it when Farram had gone.

"Remember seeing the sledge in the moonlight?" Susie Cornforth murmured.

Jack smiled, and his hand went to the three stars at his shoulder. With luck, he should soon be a crown up. "The Cornforths have a special perfection," he said. "There's no error about *that*!"

George Longdon.

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The mysteries of ancient Egypt have long held archaeologists and travellers captive in their endeavour to unravel a way of life thousands of years extinct. How much more intriguing—and baffling—to try and interpret a Martian ecology which had perished long before Man became civilised ? Always supposing such artifacts were there to be interpreted.

THE CITY CALLS

By Kenneth Bulmer

Illustrated by HUTCHINGS

The orange sand that had slithered and whispered all day across the desert had grown by wind-driven stages into a ceaseless fretting torrent without demanding his attention : until now, standing awkwardly in the shadowed pit, Hunter brought his time-ensnared mind back to an annoyed understanding of the pressures of the present. Digging was obviously over for the day. Even then, he had no sense of urgency.

He activated his outside wipers and under their busy fingers the rime of sand cleared from the whole area of his faceplate. He stared upwards. Taggerty was at the pit-edge, leaning over at an impossible angle under the light gravity. Hunter could just see Taggerty's florid

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face gleaming with sweat in the rays of the dying sun. The electronics man was worried. Hunter grimaced and waved an arm.

In his earphones the other's voice was ragged :

" Lane—come on up, for Sargon's sake ! There's a king-size storm blowing up. I don't fancy a night lost out here."

" I'm coming, Tagger. Have you started the creeper ?"

" All running. Chase yourself out of there fast."

Hunter looked down. He stamped a boot regretfully against the red packed sand. Down there, he was sure, lay the answer to problems vexing the scientific brains of Earth. Well, there was always tomorrow. He flexed his knees, jumped and sailed up easily to clear the pit-edge and plunge ankle-deep into dust and sand loose from the digging. Moving forward, he lunged down and followed Taggerty towards the creeper. Up ahead he could see a fair distance across the desert until all vision was obscured by what, at that distance, seemed to be the red velvet curtains that swished across the stage at the end of the play.

It was bad, at that.

Driven by the attenuated atmosphere, woolly clouds of sand and dust, outriders of the main mass, billowed around him, their individual grains pattering at his coveralls like thousands of tiny insects. He shivered. Mars was nothing like home.

As if in denial the drumming thunder of rockets, thinned and robbed of their elemental grandeur by the rarefied air, pulsed downward like a physical weight. It was useless trying to see the incoming ship and, just for the moment, Hunter was more interested in climbing aboard the creeper and beating the storm back to base than in fruitless speculations why a ship should be here at all at this time. None was due, he knew well enough ; he had a replacement cyclotron on order which was holding up work by its absence.

The ship's rockets stuttered, like a radio jazzing on a loose connection ; then they cut flat. Only the high piercing keen of the wind and sand and the endless *frou-frou* of dust against dust reached Hunter's ears.

" He's too high to cut," Taggerty said harshly. " He's going to smash—"

Like a man clearing his throat, the crash of the rockets punched out. Futilely, Hunter peered aloft. He'd forgotten his own storm-born peril, lost in human reaction against the greater perils that immediately threatened those in the plummeting rocket above. Once you've been into space you've joined the club. If faring the seas of Earth could breed a brotherhood strong enough to crush the barriers of race and creed—then by how much more did the crossing of space engender a comradeship transcending anything known before ?

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Hunter and Taggerty exchanged quick looks. Their eyes, agleam with liquid reflections in the last slanting rays of the unnaturally small sun, told all there was to know. They turned and began to search the sky again, tilting their heads to pick up the intermittent sound of the rockets, unconsciously swinging them in parody of radar bowls. The sound slammed sullenly now, beating back from the ground, seeming to push at them with angry, impotent fists.

A gleam. A wispy match-flame against the angry sky. A tiny, brilliant dot of fire. The expunged fragments of atoms, broken and tossed by grinning venturis to support the ship that bore them.

The ship, that was crashing onto the surface of Mars through a rising sandstorm—as so very many ships had crashed before. The

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creeper climbed and fell over the sandy dunes, its engine racing, heading out towards where that tiny speck of flame dropped swiftly to a meeting with the indifferent dust. All around now the sky was deep red and black with sand in a stupendous inferno, crimson afterglow visibly shading in the sand-soaked thin air, purple and indigo thrusting the hard bright points of stars through fragmentary gaps between rushing masses. Mars was like a painter on a drunk.

Dust had penetrated the creeper's cabin making it necessary for the men to wear their face masks : Hunter could feel the chafing irritation against his skin. More sand was piling up out there across the painted desert and he began to compute mentally what this extra jaunt might mean in terms of fuel and air and time. If it wasn't for the storm, they'd do it easily—but then, if it wasn't for the storm they wouldn't have any need to do it. Taggerty nudged him and pointed.

Hunter looked—and closed his eyes.

Sound came then, moving across the face of the planet like a broom, clearing out the cobwebs in his brain and leaving only the echoing clang of bells to stun his senses. Taggerty was swearing in a monotone. The creeper lurched, rearing in the blast. Its engine whined keen and high, like a wounded beast. But there had been no flash. In the instant that Hunter had shut his eyes, the fractional moment before the ship hit, he had expected supernal light to blind him.

The rocket hadn't blown up.

" Give her all she'll take," Hunter said, his tongue clumsy in his mouth. " They'll be split open like a fruit."

" If they weren't wearing suits—" Taggerty didn't finish, slammed the acceleration on hard.

Then they were slewing under the twisted bulk of the rocket. Hunter had forgotten the unpleasantness this would cause back at base ; the Director could go jump in the lake, if there were such a thing as a lake on Mars. This was primitive stuff, rescuing Earth-people in peril on an alien planet.

The rocket had been one of the latest models. Her atomic pile had plunged deeply into the sand, leaving behind it an intestinal confusion of piping. Venturis lay scattered, still smoking. A few empty tanks had split open like rotten gourds. The whole area smoked under a haze of fumes, blown and torn by the wind.

The cabin had been wrenched free by the impact. It lay a hundred yards away from the main wreckage.

In all the clamour and confusion of the storm they wouldn't have seen the cabin if someone hadn't been waving an electric torch. Taggerty crashed the creeper over. Hunter unclipped the cabin bubble

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and jumped out onto a track guard, waited until the last second and then hurled himself off. He stumbled amidst a shower of upflung sand, staggered, and then was reaching with one outstretched hand for the rocket's cabin.

It had cracked like an egg under a hammer. Jagged edges gaped in an idiot's grin. The torch flashed again. He stumbled across yielding sand towards the flicker of light. It was quite dark now out across the desert. The torch went out.

Activating his outside speaker, he shouted.

"Hallo! Anyone there?"

Even to him the words were thin, scraped from the top of Mount Everest. He tried again, moving forward slowly.

Taggerty's voice, in his earphones, was indecently alive and full-blooded. "Hold on, Lane. I'll bring a torch."

Hunter's knees struck something. He stumbled forward but the light gravity was not enough to make him fall. He bent down and explored the shape with his fingers. Spacesuit. Helmet—wait, ah, yes—intact. As far as he could tell, running his hands over the body, the suit was uncracked. He found the torch, clicked it on in the same instant that Taggerty's light circled him.

For a moment, blinded, he saw nothing. Then he made out the spacesuited figure lying prostrate. He had no need to say anything; the next step was obvious. Some time later they swirled away from the remains of the rocket, leaving four dead men in the cabin for later burial, and rushing the sole survivor to the base hospital. It would be a touch and go business.

Spacemen became used to thinking and acting fast. Time shot by on Mars. Slowcoaches didn't last long.

That opinion was personified by Director Max Loubet. As Hunter and Taggerty came into the Director's office after seeing the crash victim into the base hospital, Max Loubet pinched his eyes down into slits, stood leaning forward on his knuckles against the polished plastic of his desk and said:

"And just what the hell have you two been up to?"

"Rescuing the sole survivor from that crashed rocket."

Loubet didn't move a muscle in his body. His jaw simply thrust forward; it was as though he had danced a widdershin to attract attention. The atmosphere became frozen.

"I am aware of that. I want to know what you were doing out on the surface to be in a position to effect the rescue. At that time. And with a creeper. Well?"

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Hunter swallowed. He could feel Taggerty's eyes on him. He said, not defiantly, but stubbornly : " We were digging."

" Digging ? I see. Cabbages, perhaps ?"

Hunter flushed—a childish habit that only happened when he was annoyed or made to feel ridiculous. Right now, he had both emotions.

Loubet thought too much of himself. After all, he was only the Director of a crummy base on Mars with the assignment of checking atmosphere and mineral content of the rocks. The way he talked you'd think he was director of Mars Project, aiming to replenish the atmosphere of Mars with oxygen freed from the ground, torn from the drills thousands of feet down. And old Professor Lehrer, who hated authority, would just love that. Lehrer Land, some people called Mars.

Loubet was saying : " If you don't have anything to say to me, Doctor Hunter, I suggest you would care to explain to a court of enquiry ?"

" I said we were digging," Hunter said, a little out of breath as though he had been running. " We were trying to uncover some more of the old Martian city."

" Martian city fiddlesticks !" Loubet was annoyed. " I've warned you before about that, Hunter. The psychiatrists will be very interested in what you have to say. Your job is to make Mars habitable for colonists from Earth ; not to dig up imaginary relics from a non-existent past."

" The city is there," Hunter said evenly. " We've found walls and the beginnings of a road—"

" Which only you have seen ! The sand is very conveniently blown over these walls and roads whenever anyone else helps you with the digging." Loubet's face assumed a wise, helpful expression. " Look, Hunter. Why don't you admit that this city is only a dream of your mind ? It is a means whereby you attempt to throw off the worry you feel about—"

Loubet stopped. Hunter smiled grimly. The director, caught up in the eloquence of his own deductions, had said too much. So they thought he was cracking up ? They thought he'd been beaten by Mars ? They expected to have to send him Earthside.

Hunter moved forward, leaving Taggerty, and bent over the desk until his face was not six inches from Loubet's.

He said : " I am perfectly sane. I know what I am doing. My work is going well—and will go better as soon as the cyclotron gets here from Earth. There is nothing against my academic record the council can possibly find. And—there is a Martian city out there in the desert."

Loubet sat down, picked up a file and began to flick through it meticulously. Hunter, still standing in his strained position, could see

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the crescent of pink scalp where the director's hair thinned. Taggerty shifted his feet uncomfortably.

Loubet looked up, a muscle in the side of his face jumping. Then he said : " Doctor Hunter. You will not take any further trips to the desert. We cannot afford the waste of creeper time. That will be all."

Hunter stepped back. He felt as though he had been slapped round the face. His eyes burned. He turned roughly and blundered from the office, not seeing Taggerty, not seeing the plastic walls and ceiling lights, not seeing anything.

He had not been able to say anything. If he'd opened his mouth he'd have said things for which, later, he might have been sorry. But Loubet couldn't think he'd get away with treating a leading physicist like a child ! A hand gripped his arm.

" Take it easy, Lane ! He's got worries, too."

" I know, Taggers. But he's no right to talk to me like that."

" I hear that Lehrer is breathing down his neck."

" I should worry."

Taggerty's face swam into focus. It was florid and grim. Little veins stood out over the skin.

" You should, Lane. Lehrer has put in a no-confidence report on this base—and that means—"

" That means we'll be closed down. And Lehrer will take control of our projects, integrate them with his organisation and we'll just be numbers, cyphers, in his machine."

" So we go sky-larking off to the desert in search of ancient Martian cities—and guess how that looks to Loubet."

Hunter felt suddenly guilty, and tried to throw off the mental images that conjured. " That Martian city *is* there ! And I'm going to find it and convince Loubet—and not only him. All the men of science concerned on Earth are waiting on my next report—"

" You mean to say you reported it to Earth ?"

They were walking down the corridor leading to the project's bar. Inside, Hunter ordered quickly. He smiled. " Of course I did. I wanted to ensure that my findings weren't buried in some pigeon-hole in the project." He took out a micro-photo letter. " Listen to this. ' Follow with great interest your research. Existence of artificial constructions needs to be proved beyond doubt before the government will authorise an expedition. Request you proceed earliest on further excavations.' Well, what do you think of that ?" Hunter's voice was triumphant.

Taggerty moved his glass round moodily.

" That doesn't mean a thing, Lane, and you know it. Sure it's important if we find remains of the ancient Martians, if there were

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any. And of course the government isn't going to sanction spending money to send an expedition here without final proof. But the main thing in our lives is this project we're on now !" Taggerty thumped the glass in emphasis. "We've got to pump a continual supply of oxygen into the atmosphere, change it, filter it, make the arid red surface green and homely. That's our job, Lane, not chasing after dead ghosts of another time."

Before Hunter could sort the confused loyalties and desires that whirlpooled in his tired mind his attention was taken by the arrival of a man wearing the white coat of a medico.

"Won't you join us, Sims ?" Taggerty called. "What'll you have?"

"Screwdriver." Sims was small and wiry and brown as toffee. His curly closely-clustered black hair shone under the lights. "Thanks. I need it."

"Will he live ?"

"He'll live, possibly. Less than a fifty-fifty chance. We've already grafted a new leg bone—fibula—and a patella. His were ground up a bit. We managed to patch his own tibia. God, I'm tired !"

"D'you know who he is ?"

"Not yet. He's still under. Anyway, wasn't it an unscheduled rocket ?"

"Yes. Until they speak to this chap and check the contents of the cabin, the thing's a mystery."

"Probably more red-tape from Earth," Hunter broke in nastily.

"They could send that via the radio ?"

"Not now. Earth's behind the sun."

"Here's to you." The glasses up-ended. "Anyway, it must be important for them to fly an unscheduled rocket."

Sims looked around casually, wetting his lips. Then he leaned forward and Hunter caught the anxiety in his voice.

"Everything all right with the project ?"

Taggerty said : "Sure. Every little thing."

"What are you getting at ?" Hunter said harshly.

"Nothing special," Sims said. "Just wondering."

"Like wondering what Lehrer has to say ? Is that it ?" There was an edge to Hunter's voice that startled himself.

"Well ?" Sims ruffled up. "So maybe we in medic don't get to know all the inner circle secrets. But we like to know what's going on. After all, it's our future as well."

Hunter's shoulders slumped. He picked up his glass.

"Yeah. I suppose you're right. It's a hell of a world. Everybody has things to do and everybody else has good reasons why they

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shouldn't. And the little guys get squeezed in the middle." He made a grimace of disgust. "Everyone on the project knows Loubet hates Lehrer's guts, and, as a result, we get pushed around, our own experiments swamped and ourselves due to become has-been back numbers. Isn't that the picture, Taggers? Scientific politics!" Hunter made a rude sound.

Sims looked covertly at Taggerty. Taggerty nodded. "That's about the picture. It's supposed to be secret; but in our sort of society secrets don't exist. And you will have been warned."

"Thanks." Sims finished his drink and rose to leave.

"Oh, Sims," Hunter said, glancing up. "Let me know when he comes round, will you? I've a sort of paternal interest in him now."

"Okay, I'll do that. Cheers." Sims went out.

Hunter felt restless. He was still smarting from the cold contempt of Loubet. He stood up, parrying Taggerty's raised eyebrows with a murmured: "Got to think, Taggers. One thing's for sure—I'm not giving up looking for the city!"

He went out and up to the observation gallery. Movement refreshed him. He could swing it. If he put his point of view forward, angled it so that the rest of the staff here on the base got the idea that by encouraging Earthside interest in this ancient Martian city they'd extend their own projects, that way everyone would be happy—even Loubet.

Projects snowballed so much when specialists hardly knew a thing outside their speciality. Duplication of effort was commonplace. It had all begun with the old-time security bugs; if you don't let research data go outside your own laboratory then 'they' won't be able to steal it; of course, your own scientists don't get the benefit of it either but that's just one of those things. Why—when they were building the first rockets there were as many as fifty different projects all working along the same lines to crack the same problems—and material one outfit turned up was classified and scientists of another outfit didn't have high enough security classifications to have access to it. Crazy. Yet stemming from entirely logical premises. Hunter chewed his lip thoughtfully and damned the sun for standing between him and Earth.

There might be a further message on the rocket bringing his cyclotron—although it was unlikely. He'd have to—his mind tried to avoid the flat statement, found no euphemism and went doggedly on—fake something convincing.

Twenty four hours thirty seven and a half minutes, or exactly a day, later, Hunter strode briskly into Taggerty's room. The electronics man looked up from the table, where he was painstakingly making a

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golf-club from scrap rescued from the laboratories. He put down a pair of pliers and said : " Well ?"

" Check me," Hunter said. " One—this site will be closed down and we shall be given minor jobs in the main project unless—two—the ancient Martian city is found. Then, of course, we'll be installed here in a permanent camp."

" So far—" began Taggerty, to break off as Hunter raised a hand and went on :

" But, three—unless we find the Martian city fast, the base here will be moved. Heads they win, tails we lose. We can't search for the city here when the main project is hundreds of miles away. Suggestions ? "

Taggerty looked uncomfortable. " Look, Lane," he said at last. " Listen to my side—I believe you, understand that. But—I've never seen this city ! Apart from you, no-one has ever seen it ! Suppose, just suppose, it is wishful thinking ? Suppose you are imagining this to satisfy yourself."

Hunter laughed. The sound was not pleasant. " I know what you mean, Taggers," he said, at last, not unkindly. " You have your golf, Lobachevsky has his model spaceships. We all must have some hobby to take our mind off where we are and how many millions of miles of nothingness separates us from home. I know. And you used to worry because I didn't lose myself in a hobby—well, archaeology has always been a strong interest to me, and I intend to make it a successful one. Now, listen. All the personnel here want to stay on and avoid old Lehrer and his power mania. Right ? We'll spread the word to a responsible group what I'm trying to do, convince them that this is the only way they'll stay here—and get a team to make an ancient Martian artifact."

" Fake ? "

" Yes, Taggers ! Fake, if needs be. Don't you see that we must have something solid to show. And I tell you there *is* a city buried out there in the desert. And I intend to find it, against all the red-tape Earth can throw. As for Loubet, we'll make him work against himself. When someone—someone else—brings in this convincing artifact, he'll be forced to accede to my request—and this base will remain open."

" All right," Taggerty said doubtfully. " I guess you think this crazy scheme will work. As for faking, well, that should be easier than Piltdown times. No water seepage on Mars here, so no fluorine. And Carbon-14 would have all dissipated—the Martians must have been around before 25,000 years ago. Uranium ?"

" You check out a hundred percent so far, Taggers." Hunter was smiling, like a warrior in the midst of battle. " Uranium can be fixed

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—I'll irradiate the specimen in the big cyc. My new cyclotron might have done the job easier ; but what the hell ? This is war, Taggers, and don't forget it."

" Do we need to tell anyone else ?"

Hunter considered. " I think so. Just in case the whole thing blows open, we must have witnesses to the reasons we are faking—otherwise we'd be finished professionally."

Taggerty grunted assent and picked up his golf-club.

" And we'll put this in writing and arrange it so we come out with our noses clean when we tell the authorities afterwards. After we've found the city !"

" Tell me again, Lane. What have you seen of this city out there ?" Taggerty swished the club.

" Well," Hunter said, pulling his lower lip. " There was a wall, a brick wall, same colour as the sand. And what looked like a pavement of crushed rock, a mosaic pattern, which must have been artificial because the sand blew from it and I found it hard and unyielding. Things must last for centuries here."

" So what do you intend to use ?"

" Haven't decided yet. We could fuse some rock and sand together, irradiate it, dampen that off, tie it in a red ribbon and have Lobachevsky find it on a routine sweep."

With slight additional refinements that was just what they did do.

During the manufacture of the ' ancient Martian artifact,' Hunter was sweating in apprehension that recall would sound before completion. The thing became an obsession. He was driven by this desire to baulk the forces opposed to him. It was something more than just anger at red-tape minded authority, more than annoyance with Loubet and a wish to cut him down to size. It had a desperation born of Hunter's conviction that there was more to life than just the hard, grind-stone application to science—that all this new world they were trying to create here on Mars would be wasted, barren in a quite different way, if they didn't have time out—even the shortest of times out—to follow their own minds and hearts, and forget the cruel dictates of science in its passionless pursuit of truth.

All of which meant that old Lobachevsky, his eyes disappearing in folds of flesh as he grunted and grinned, went out with the artifact aboard his creeper, and returned with all stops out, like a herald, blazing with excitement at his discovery. Hunter and Taggerty went along to the bar.

" Sand blew up, thought I was in for a stiff 'un—and there this durn' thing was !" Lobachevsky was thoroughly enjoying himself.

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As a mineralogist he had much to do at this site and had no wish to be forcibly transplanted. He showed the manufactured artifact like a mother displaying her first born. Which was accurate, too. Lobachevsky had been the consulting adviser during the manufacture. "So there *were* ancient Martians, after all!" was the general comment.

A space had been cleared on the bar, and, surrounded by glasses and bottles, the awesome sandy-coloured object rested and exuded age. They'd done a good job, at that, and Hunter felt no qualms as Loubet pushed through and stopped, feet wide apart, to stare with out-thrust head. Hunter felt a peculiar satisfaction. The reactions of Loubet were highly educative and interesting; he must have been struggling within himself with the desires to cheer and curse. Cheer, because now the base would remain alive; curse, because that brash Hunter had been proven right.

Brash Hunter sipped his drink and enjoyed it all.

Then Sims came in, face flushed and eyes nervously darting around the bar. He came straight over to Loubet. And what he said wiped away all Hunter's enjoyment.

"He's conscious and rational, sir. Still insists he's here to take over the project and—"

Loubet shut Sims up here, quickly, talking to cover what the medico had said. But Hunter had caught it clearly enough. He looked around. Others were looking politely at Loubet and Sims, their faces puzzled. Loubet's heavy face was flushed and angry and perspiration gleamed along his forehead. He swallowed two or three times, and opened his mouth, then closed it with a snap as though unable to make up his mind.

A little, growing, nerve-irritating tension hung in the air. Everyone was aware that machinations were meshing in the background. Loubet had to speak—or lose their respect.

Finally, he said: "It appears that the news would be disseminated in any case—" he sounded a little bitter, "—and therefore I might as well say now that the ship that crashed was bringing a Professor Merrihill to take over this project base. His assignment was to dismantle everything and then report to Professor Lehrer. Mars Project would take over from there."

A low-voiced mutter of protest from the men in the bar attested their feelings. Old Loubet, for all his faults, had at least fought for the base; he wouldn't dismantle it. That was why this Merrihill had been brought in. And Earth on the other side of the sun, too. There must be strong political moves going on. All Hunter was worried about, all he could now allow himself to become agitated about, was the need

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to find the ancient Martian city. Strangely, he felt that it would provide the answer to the riddles of Mars—and would give a most potent solution to the current oxygen and water problems. The old Martians must have known a good deal about their planet before it had killed them off.

Loubet held up a hand. "Professor Merrihill is too weak to take over. He may not even live. I propose to carry on here as normal, until Merrihill is well or until any other development occurs." His face lightened. "But now we have the problem of this city. I think that we must instigate a full-scale search." He looked around the bar, at each of the men crowding in, peering over the shoulders of their comrades. "I don't think I need add that if the city is found, then this base will most probably remain. As part of a much larger project, of course. Now—" He began to detail parties and section leaders for the assault on the desert.

Hunter leaned over the maps, his nostrils flaring. Now he would begin to live!

On the third day of the search two unpleasant things happened. Hunter had been out at the pit he and Taggerty had previously dug. They only knew it by the slightly easier way the sand came up. All day they dug and found nothing. A storm chased them back to base and there they waited for two creepers to return. The two creepers never did make it back.

And during that period of strain a radio call came in from Lehrer at the main base enquiring about Merrihill and sniffing like a dog around the reason for his Mars visit. The crash had had to be reported; but now Loubet played it close to the chest. He reported that Merrihill was still in coma.

The following day another creeper didn't come back and the three sent to find it only just made it to base themselves. All across the face of Mars there seemed to be a restlessness, a growing clamour, sand and dust whirling and vibrating, changing the ground contours daily; nerves of the Earthmen became fine drawn and scraped, like sand-fretted wood.

They had to dig their way out of the domes every time now and the outside installations were intermittently buried. There was radio silence when the masts were under.

The old timers swore they'd never encountered conditions like this before. All work slowed down. Tempers shortened and three fist fights had to be broken up. The fourth went the full distance until one battler was knocked unconscious. Mars was too tightly at everyone's throat. And the damned dust seeped into a ventilator gasket

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and everyone choked and coughed and streamed at the eyes until the damage was repaired and the muck pumped out. Murder was waiting to spring. Hunter began to dream of the lost city.

He was acute enough to be able to evaluate his own desire to find the city ; he had a little trouble seeing all of Loubet's angles. There was the fact that, when no work could be done, looking for a city channelled off energy. And Lehrer reported that things were not going well for the main project. They needed more staff and equipment. The job was proving to be something like ten times as tough as had been expected. There had always been pessimists to say that you never could give Mars back a breathable atmosphere, that you could never pry water from that dusty ball. Hunter had always thought you could. Now, with long faces around the base, and chilling news from Lehrer, he wasn't so sure.

And yet they still looked for the city.

A sort of craze had possessed them. After they had lost men to the desert, the city had issued a challenge. Find the city—or die ! Irrational ; but basic. They went on looking.

The weather became so atrocious as to stultify the senses. For three days the eye and ear was shocked by solid progressions of sand across the land, ceaselessly streaming past, as though all the bulk of the planet must be scooped out one side and piled up the other. Then the storm blew itself out and the stars glittered minutely in the sky.

Hunter's main thought was to get away from the base where he had almost fought with Taggerty. They rode together, as usual. Not speaking. Silent in their own thoughts. To Hunter the conviction was strong that unless they found the city before the next onslaught of bad weather, they'd be done. They'd have to amalgamate with Lehrer, for the sake of both projects. And Lehrer, his authority unable to order Loubet, was waiting for word from Earth—and Merrihill lay in the hospital, with that word, unable to speak.

A stubborn, sullen pride rode Hunter now. He hadn't shaved for four days. His eyes were pits of ice, ebony ringed. Taggerty's florid face was coarse, the veins purplish. Both of them needed sleep. And they were typical of the personnel.

All day they searched, sensitive detectors probing, and admitted failure and returned to base. Driving in under sheets of sand sliding away from the domes, they parked their creeper and shed their coveralls and went through to the bar.

" You didn't find it, did you ?" Old Lobachevsky reeled towards them. His eyes were mere slits, deadly and hating. He hiccoughed. " We'll find the city, says clever Hunter. Sure, we'll find it ! Then we

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won't have to leave this lovely—hic—place ! Lovely place !" He straightened and threw his glass in Hunter's face. " Lovely place ! It's a stinking hell ! And you kept us here !"

Hunter turned with out a word and walked out.

That night Merrihill died.

Loubet knocked on Hunter's door, walked through to the bed and sat down, buckling at the knees like a rubber doll. He said dully : " Lobachevsky has told me."

Hunter poured a drink, the bottle rattling against the glass like a tambourine.

" Well ? "

" You're a selfish swine, aren't you, Hunter ?"

" You were happy enough. The base and the *status quo.*"

Loubet smashed the glass and bottle from Hunter's hands onto the floor. " I wanted this base to carry on because I thought we could do a better job here than being tied down by Lehrer. Although I admit I was pleased we had an excuse to carry on." He laughed bitterly. " Even I had visions of a great research establishment and palaeontologists and anthropologists and archaeologists—all the ologists under the sun, frantically digging and discovering the magnificent Martian past. I had those visions, although I'd not dared to hope. But you ; all you wanted was a little self glorification ! You just wanted to find this city you claimed was there ; liar ! There is no city ; all you really wanted, Hunter, was your name in lights ! For your piffling little ounce of egoboo you were willing to subvert the energy of this base ; with the result that we are facing extinction."

Hunter sat up, a wild fear flaming through him.

Loubet said viciously : " The Earth is past the sun. I've just heard that supply rockets will be delayed. That one that crashed had our fresh supplies aboard, and they were contaminated." He stared contemptuously at Hunter. " I should think you'd be pretty proud of your handiwork. Because of you, this base—and the main base of Mars Project—is likely to be finished. When everyone is buried under the sand, Hunter, happy dreams !"

Loubet stood up, turned, and walked out the door.

He left Hunter moodily trying to find a single drink from the spilled bottle. Hunter's inflamed eyes hurt. His body ached. He tried to tell himself that the picture that Loubet painted was distorted—why, even the men killed freed extra rations for those remaining. But he found it difficult to convince himself. The central fact remained true —so far neither bases on Mars had produced so much as a single drop of water or bubble of oxygen. And, unless they were relieved soon,

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the men would die. He laughed a little wildly and told himself again that that had nothing to do with the city.

After all—he had seen the wall, hadn't he? And the pavement of crushed ochre rock? He had, he must have—his hands gripped over his forehead like a vice; of course he had!

He staggered towards the door, got a grip on himself, straightened his coveralls and walked quite steadily down the passage towards the creeper garage. The blast caught him as he passed a corner. He was flung sideways, like a rabbit in the teeth of a terrier, hurled full-length along the side passage. Air cannoned in the distance. A siren started up, coughed, and choked off. Somewhere, a man was screaming.

Dust patterned the walls. Some lights went off. Hunter pushed a knee under him, rose unsteadily to his feet, and with a hasty swipe at the blood flowing into his eyes from a cut on his forehead rushed off towards the main airlock.

He had a horror of being caught in the surface environment without a suit or mask. By the time he had contacted other men the danger was over. Emergency doors had reacted, slamming shut as the air whooshed past. But a full half of the base had been destroyed. And with it the men who could have given an explanation for the tragedy.

Lobachevsky, still drunk, reeled forward, covered with dust so that he looked like an animated bronze statue.

"It's your fault, Hunter!—Your fault! By God, I'll see you don't —" His voice went hoarse and deep.

Hunter met his rush, parried the first blow, and clipped the old man compassionately alongside the jaw. He felt a heel. Lobachevsky fell down, his mouth gaping. He looked shrunken and silly—and old. Like them all.

When they told Hunter that Loubet had been killed he felt older still. Ironically, command now developed upon him. And, manifestly, there was only one thing he could do. After having struggled and schemed to keep the base open, working against authority, he had now to assume that mantle of authority and order the base closed. He must tell the men to shut down and move across to Lehrer.

And the city!

Decision made a hard dry ball in his throat. He swallowed lumpily. His stomach was on the wall of death. He called Taggerty over. Quickly, he told him to ready a creeper, filling it with water and provisions and age-testing equipment. At the last Taggerty screwed up his face.

"You're not still going after that city now, Lane?"

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Underlining that remark and stressing Hunter's own idiocy a second, smaller, explosion thudded. Sand and smoke flew. Men raced past, shouting.

"Yes!" Hunter said loudly. "If I can find the city and then report to Lehrer, some day soon we shall be back here."

Taggerty looked at him strangely, nodded, and went off at a run. Hunter began shepherding the others towards the store rooms and creeper garages. Someone got off a message to Lehrer. Evacuation was in full swing.

The job of clearing the base had to be done, and Hunter did it with his usual thoroughness. He checked personally through dormitories and rooms and mess-halls. Everyone had disappeared. There was a sharp dryness in the air which told him that the pumps were losing their battle; soon the base would be as frigid and alien as the surface of Mars. Going through the bar he snatched up a bottle of whisky. Behind him a whole wall collapsed and rubble and concrete cascaded, moving with odd slowness under Martian gravity. A room was bared. He saw a bed, filled with sand, a splintered wardrobe, a dressing table. On the dressing table—the manufactured Martian artifact. He growled as though in pain, stepped forward, lifted the thing and threw it as hard as he could into the dust.

Then he ran towards the airlocks.

Aboard the creeper, Taggerty swung the machine into line with the others, began to move off over the desert.

"The other way, Taggers, to the city!" yelled Hunter.

"It's no good, Lane. We're going to Lehrer."

"I'll drive, then."

"Sorry—" Taggerty shook his head. Hunter leaped on him, knocked him off the creeper. He stamped hard on the accelerator, swung the creeper crazily away from the line. Someone picked Taggerty up. Watching, Hunter saw them resume their creeping towards main Mars Base—they weren't coming after him! He didn't fully comprehend what that meant.

The machine bucked over the sand dunes. Already a storm was building up and sheets of sand whipped across driven by the thin and biting air. Hunter shivered. The devil of it was, of course, that no-one else had seen the city.

If they had—they'd have believed him, come with him now in this last attempt to save the base. Although, come to think of it, the base was finished. Hunter shook his head. Thinking was difficult, and the roaring in his ears confused him. The city—he must find the city . . .

And he did find it.

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The wind had scoured away sand and dust, cleaned off the tessellated pavement, exhumed walls and arches, revealed the object of his passionate search. He sat looking at it as though it were the Holy Grail.

Then, with an inexplicable apprehension he peered closer. He had found the city. Why should he have this sudden unease? He laughed nervously, and swung down onto the hard mosaic floor. Walking towards the arch, he exulted anew. Now the men and ships would come from Earth. Now he would have a base to himself—poor old Loubet, a good sort; but just not good enough. He, Hunter, would be the base director.

Beyond the arch he stood for a moment, his gloved hand resting against the stone. On either side of a neat path a series of sarcophagi to the number of twelve receded from his dazed vision. He saw that they were made, not from stone, but from fuzed sand, as was the arch, and the pavement—as had been the faked artifact he had produced. The only way you could build with sand was to fuze it into a solid—and that demanded high technical knowledge and skills.

But Hunter was not thinking of any of that as he walked slowly, as though he were under water, or in a dream, between the silent rows of stone coffins. Inscriptions covered them. A little voice whispered in his mind: "Further back than linear A—further back than the Flood." He walked, his feet making the faintest of shushing sounds on the pavement.

At the far end of the coffins, rounding off the end of the pavement, lay an object that was at once nauseatingly familiar and frighteningly different. Its metal shone with the multi-billions of scratches it had endured during its thousands of years, resting on or under the Martian surface. Things wouldn't change on Mars, someone had said. No water; just the continual wearing action of the sand, burnishing the metal to an eye-searing lustre. Confusion, and a great fear, rose chokingly in Hunter.

He stood, staring at the spaceship, crushed and overwhelmed by the magnitude of his mistake.

The ship resembled any one that might have come from Earth. The wide angled fins, the few fuel tanks, the motor compartments, the cabin—split—the trailing intestinal chaos. It reminded him vividly of the ship he and Taggerty had seen crash. Looking at the twelve monumental coffins reminded him of the four simple graves they had made for the crew. It all tied in. A ship had crashed on Mars and the crew had been buried.

Something like thirty thousand years ago.

He knew that was the answer, the only possible answer, from some hidden fund of knowledge deep buried within him. He swung blindly,

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one arm flung up across his helmet as though to ward off the spirits who must guard this spot.

So even these ancients, these ancient *Earthmen*, had been unable to tame and colonise Mars. And the two bases of modern man were crumbling before the red planet's onslaught. Even finding what he had, with all its absorbing interest to archaelogists of Earth, was useless. No-one had believed him before, there was nothing now to make them believe him elsewhere.

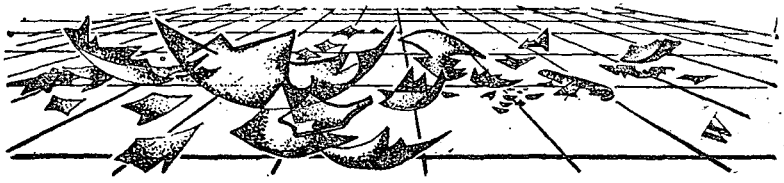
The implications began to sink into his befuddled mind.

He stumbled back to his creeper. Sand rose about him everywhere. Because of his desire to find the Martian city the two Earth bases would collapse. And all he had found was the wreck of a previous Earthly attempt on Mars.

Sand. Dust. His wipers were having difficulty in clearing his face plate. Where was the creeper? He peered myopically around. Here. Surely, he had left it here, just past the arch? On the pavement? But—there was no pavement, just sand, and more sand, rising into a towering, wind-whipped mound. Hundreds of tons of sand. Moving and surging, covering things, burying the creeper.

Hunter stared at the new sand dunes. Under them, somewhere, was his creeper. And the wind and storm were rising. And night was falling. And he was an Earthman, alone on Mars.

Kenneth Bulmer.



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All Earth-type planets are not likely to have exactly the same conditions as we experience on this water-covered planet of ours. For instance, a planet without a satellite is not likely to have much of a tidal problem—but take the other extreme and find a planet with nine satellites and the ocean tides would present quite a problem once in a while. As author Rayer indicates in the following story.

THREE-DAY TIDAL

By Francis G. Rayer

Illustrated by TAYLOR

The powerful motor barge slid to rest by the concrete jetty and bumped imperceptibly, swaying gently to the waves lapping her hull. From her deck Joe Baring stepped to the pier, composed of the pounded rock of Regulus I, and sloping away up to the mainland fifty yards ahead, where the land-based section of the power station stood, a veritable castle backed by fleecy clouds. The two years hard work had been well spent, he thought, his feet thudding on the brown aggregate. Regulus I was a planet with promise. When her sun, Regulus Major, had first been pointed out to him on the star map, midway between Hydra and Ursa Major, he had felt indecision, hesitation. The accomplishment of work well done had dispelled both.

A tall man of forty-five stood on the pier, waiting. "I suppose the generators will be running within the hour, Mr. Baring?" he asked.

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Joe halted, nodding. Chris Winnett looked gloomy—but that was usual. "I'm just going to report the first stage of the work finished. If Regulus I has no coal or other fuel we've at least enough tidal power to make that unimportant."

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Winnett looked morose. "Been simpler if the preliminary investigation had located coal seams. But there aren't any. Ever wondered why?"

"Can't say I have. Because there was no large vegetation or forests, I suppose."

"Of course. But why wasn't there such vegetation—the planet is as old as Earth."

Joe shrugged, and turned to face the way he had come. The sea breeze stirred his blonde hair and he screwed up his light blue eyes against the sunlight reflected from the water. The circumstances of millions of years before were not his to unfathom. His duty was the present: a colony would need power, and the tides would furnish it. The sea-borne section of the generating plant rode at the mouth of the estuary, tethered by giant cables. From the pier it was just visible as a long, low shape almost lost in the haze, and backed by the brilliance of Regulus Major's setting.

"I don't like things I don't understand," Chris Winnett stated behind him.

Joe put his back to the setting sun, recalling his mind from the great floating powerhouse that would soon hum into action. "Meaning the lack of primeval vegetation on an Earth scale?"

"Mostly."

Joe shrugged. "There was no coal on Mars, remember?"

"Mars had an extinct culture. Regulus I hasn't."

A new world always posed problems, Joe admitted as he strode easily up the rising pier. The lack of coal, initially troublesome, had ceased to bother him the moment the tidal-power project had been commenced. Newcomers to a planet must make do with what they had. Tidal power would do fine until the authorities on Earth became sufficiently clear of their own red-tape to state whether atomic generating plant would be permitted.

A small wing of the huge brown building housed the sub-space radio. Joe hoped he was not late. Project Commander Harvey was acid-tongued against laxity, and excuses calmed him as much as petrol thrown on a bonfire.

The indicator bulb on the equipment was just awaking to a glow as Joe entered. He closed the door hastily and settled his six-foot body on the mushroom stool. Fair, scarcely thirty-five, Joe had a certain fiery undercurrent that sometimes bubbled up, but was usually hidden by his caution and thoughtfulness.

Static crackled and hissed in the reproducer. "Contacting Regulus I project."

"Joe Baring here."

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There was a delay, then a new voice : " Project Commander Harvey here. I regret being a trifle late."

Joe smiled. " I have been waiting, sir. I hope it's nothing important"

" A commission meeting. It's unlikely atomic power will be allowed on Regulus I for years—they're afraid the natives will profit by the introduction of atomics to blow us up !" A snort revealed the commander's opinion of such excess caution. " The tidal power station is going to schedule ? "

" Yes, sir ! It should be running within hours."

" Good. No one can pretend the natives might use *that* to clear us off the planet !"

" No, sir. I have great faith in its success."

Commander Harvey made a sound denoting approval. " You have also now set up good relationships with the natives ?"

Joe hesitated. It was difficult to admit two years had accomplished nothing whatever in that direction. " Not yet, sir." He hoped the background static would make his hope sound convincing.

" Then don't delay further. It is very important indeed."

A whining bubble crossed the end of the commander's words, and Joe knew the contact was ending. The sub-radio could maintain communication for minutes only.

" We will do our best, sir !"

The light faded and he did not know if Harvey had heard. Easy to sit in a comfortable office on Earth and instruct, he thought. But hard to be on an alien planet and fulfil ! How establish friendship with a race that ignored every Earthman, or looked through him with scornful eyes ?

Outside, the sun had gone, leaving a blaze of red above the horizon. One small moon had risen, and Joe searched the heavens for others. The nine moons that circled Regulus I were a constant thing of wonder to him. Each on its own path, they rose and set in always-changing sequence, nine satellites never agreeing in orbit or period. The first time Chris Winnett had seen seven in the sky at once, his face had been gloomy with suspicion of disaster.

" Eight too many !" he growled.

Remembering, Joe smiled. Luna was something of an exception, and the nine moons of Regulus I at least gave variety. A second moon was rising from the east, overtaking the first, and Joe did not doubt others were concealed by the brilliance of Regulus Major's setting.

Chris Winnett was returning from the jetty with a basket of marine specimens. He halted.

" Commander Harvey pleased, Mr. Baring ? "

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"Well enough, except for our failure with the natives. Any idea when the Linwoods went out?"

Winnett scratched his narrow jaw. "Early, just after you left in the motor barge."

Then it was time they were back, Joe thought. No one stayed away unprotected during dark, and a motor jeep with canvas hood was vulnerable.

"Think I'll look from the bluff," he said.

The jeep had radio, but if neither of the pair was listening, contact would be impossible. Joe hoped Philip Linwood's occasional irresponsibility had not caused an accident, or trouble. Not if Veronica could prevent it, he decided. What Linwood lacked his sister had in full.

The rocky promontory permitted an extensive view in all directions. The great raft, with all its equipment, was more clearly visible, but the light was fading rapidly. The wide river flowed evenly, its waters meeting the waves of the rising tide. Inland, twilight obscured the scene. A few dots of flickering red were Regulian camp-fires. If the jeep was within the field of view, its lights were extinguished. Nor was its motor audible above the murmuring tide.

Joe listened, straining his gaze over the dark landward horizon, but no rapidly-moving glow told of the Linwood's return. In some ways Regulus I resembled Earth. Gravity, air, relative land and sea areas—all were similar, but there the likeness ended. No huge forests dotted her surface, and they had found neither oil nor coal. Transporting components for the tidal power station had been a major problem, but successfully met.

Half way down the slope a Regulian stood beside the path. Equalling Joe's six feet, it met his gaze levelly as he descended. There was something disconcertingly human in its scorn, Joe thought, and he felt the unease of a child caught in wrong doing. He halted, schooling his tongue to Regulian phrases Veronica Linwood had taught him.

"Greetings. All is well?"

The eyes showed no response. The whole expression suggested a human was in all ways unworthy of any attention. Joe felt anger, suppressed it, and shrugged.

"How about a little co-operation sometime?"

Long, golden lashes closed over the eyes for a moment. "Your co-operation and presence are both alike unnecessary to us," the Regulian said.

The cutting tone brought colour to Joe's cheeks. He swore silently and went on. When he looked over his shoulder the native was continuing up the path, and did not glance back. The sleek hair

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of its head and shoulders glinted ; its step was sure, its bearing erect.

Always scorned, always ignored, Joe thought as he reached level ground. The natives numbered millions. Six-fingered, they spun fibre garments, sowed and harvested, made boats each a miracle of craftsmanship, and built dwellings of carved stone blocks. Water flowed through their villages in rock channels. In all, Joe judged them the equals of men from the ancient civilisations of Earth. They wrote a flowing cursive script, kept to themselves, and regarded Earthmen as mud.

When Joe entered the main building, Spenser, the young mechanic on radio watch, was looking for him. Relief crossed the mechanic's round face.

" It's the Linwoods, Mr. Baring."

" Trouble ?" Joe followed him back down the corridor.

" Seems the jeep's stuck and they can't shift it."

Probably Philip Linwood's fault, Joe thought. Linwood had a high accident potential.

In the radio room he dropped on a seat before the local radio equipment.

" Joe Baring here."

Linwood had obviously been waiting. " We're stuck in two feet of mud, Joe !" The tone was plaintive, irritated. " I've been trying an hour to get the jeep out."

" You want a rescue party ? "

" Of course ! There's a gang of natives here, but they won't help. They're damned unco-operative—"

Joe silenced him. " What happened ? Where are you ?"

" Not more than ten miles from you. I was trying a short cut over a stream bed. Veronica thought it looked risky—"

" But you preferred to try first and think afterwards." Joe could not resist the sarcasm. " I can't send anyone. I've told Commander Harvey the plant is to start this evening, and start it will. You'll have to get back best you can."

" But it's ten miles, Joe !"

" Then walk !" Joe snapped.

He turned up the equipment switch and any reply went unheard. Trust Philip to find trouble, he thought. He caught the expression in the young mechanic's eyes as he rose.

" You're thinking I'm hard on them, Spenser."

The other looked uncomfortable. " A rescue jeep could get there in half an hour, sir."

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Joe smiled. "Not sending one makes sense, Spenser. First, Linwood needs to realise someone can't always be present to pull him out of a hole. Second, and most important, it'll be a test to see if the Regulians *will* help. Two humans obviously in difficulty under their very noses. Miss Linwood can talk to them. The thought of ten miles of broken country on foot will make her and Linwood more persuasive. If there's an atom of sympathy or compassion in the natives they'll help !"

He ascended to the top floor of the building, where the power control equipment, so far unused, occupied a long panel. The tides moved in a strangely complex pattern, due to Regulus Major and the nine moons, but were never still, and never quite repeated the same sequence. After two years study, Chris Winnett had not wholly mapped their rise and fall. Nevertheless, ebb and flow there always was, and the power station on the great metal raft was ready.

A line ran from raft to shore, and the man left in charge answered the phone at once.

"All in order and ready, sir."

Joe felt satisfaction. Here, at least, Harvey would have no reason for complaint.

"Good," he said. "We're ready to go."

"Yes, sir !"

The line went dead and Joe replaced the phone. The tidal plant, moored to shore and seabed, could ride the rise and fall of the sea. Below the flat steel hull, extending to great depths, sluices and culverts directed the ebb and flow of mighty currents through specially designed turbines. Cables carried the power to the shore station, where voltage-control transformers provided a constant output, and distribution circuits could feed a grid upon which would depend the first civilised community.

A remote murmur not of the tides began, and meters on the long panel stirred from zero. Oil-immersed contactors thudded ; the building became as if alive, and lights outside glowed and grew. Brilliantly illuminated, the rock upon which the building stood was outlined as at noon. Away over the running sea a string of bulbs showed the full length of the tidal-power raft. Joe stood for a long time watching the spectacle, before leaving a man in charge and seeking his bunk.

Noon sun shone full on headland and estuary when Philip and Veronica Linwood, striped with dust and mud, slogged into view. *No help from the Regulians* ! Joe thought.

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Philip Linwood was angry ; his sister's lips hinted at suppressed amusement, as if she agreed the lesson was not out of place.

Joe's light blue eyes twinkled. " Sorry no one was free to help. Have any luck with the natives ?"

Linwood said something inaudible. His sister smiled. Equally dark, but several years his junior, her gaze was constant, honest, and her chin indicative of self-reliance.

" They talked, but didn't help," she said. They watched us sweating to get the jeep out, up to our knees in mud. I showed them the rope we'd got, and explained just a little extra pull would bring us clear."

" But it wasn't forthcoming ?" Joe murmured.

Her eyes clouded at the memory. " No ! In brief, I believe they didn't think us worth helping !"

Joe sighed. In two years the Regulians had shown nothing but scornful contempt for any human, and all humanity's doings. It was galling.

Philip Linwood slapped the dried mud on his trousers. " Damned unco-operative lot !"

He stamped away into the living quarters. Joe recalled that there would soon be another period of brief contact with Harvey.

" Pity they're always so awkward," he said.

She looked at him quickly. " The natives ? After two years we don't know what they think of us. Is it toleration—or hostility ?"

" Wish I knew." He started towards the block that held so much of success, yet which might become only a symbol of failure. " The sub-radio schedule means Project Commander Harvey will soon be waiting. I'd have liked to report progress with the natives."

" Was that one reason why you let us walk ?"

" Perhaps. An emergency sometimes brings out good feelings."

He went in and waited for the bulb to glow. The sub-radio schedule depended on many variables, was worked out far in advance, and was in its own way as irregular as the rise and fall of the planet's nine moons.

When Harvey came on his enthusiasm was evident even above the inter-galactic noise. " The commission is very pleased, Mr. Baring. The plant works correctly ?"

" Very well, sir."

" Good. There's a lot of important money behind this project." Something was lost in static. " I am asked to stress the great importance of keeping on terms of friendship with the natives. Without that, no colonisation is ever possible."

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Joe was glad his superior could not see his expression. "No overt act of hostility has ever arisen between Regulian and Earthman," he said guardedly.

"Good. The commission would never permit you to have atomic plant except under circumstances of full co-operation and friendship between natives and humans."

The static became a burbling whine, and Joe knew contact was going. Many light-years, and fifty relay stations away, Harvey was growing unintelligible.

"I will report all developments, sir," Joe said into the hubbub, and watched the bulb fade.

Friendship, he thought as he rose. *Co-operation*! To get either out of a Regulian was like trying to beg water spring from a stone! For once he felt a fiery upsurge of emotion he could not altogether quell.

"Damn 'em!" he said. But he knew Harvey was right. Native scorn was galling. Worse, lack of friendship suggested preparation for hostility. Possible hostility meant every man must walk armed; free expansion would be stifled; the colony could become a besieged outpost. It was no good.

At the top of the jetty Chris Winnett sat upon a perforated container, mopping his long face. His trousers were rolled to his knees, his feet muddy. Joe halted opposite him.

"Found anything new in marine life?"

"No, Mr. Baring. We've seen it all—if seeing is enough."

The tone stirred a vague unease in Joe's mind. "You're worried?"

Winnett rose from his seat on the punched lid. "Perhaps—and puzzled." He removed the lid. Joe looked in and saw a species of conical shell-fish broad as his palm, each moving on many short pseudopods.

"You've brought these in before," he said, puzzled. Winnett never wasted words or energy on the unnecessary.

"I have. There are thousands on the rocks. Usually they sit tight, but now it's different."

He put on the lid and slapped it down with a fist. Watching him, Joe felt his unease increase. Abruptly Winnett swung his legs over the jetty and dropped to the sand and rock five feet below. He paused, looking up.

"Come down here and you'll see what I mean, Mr. Baring."

Joe hesitated, then lowered his large frame down. His feet sank in slush as he followed Winnett among the pools. At last Winnett halted, pointing.

"Most of the shell-fish *were* here. Now they've other ideas."

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Joe followed his gesture. Innumerably damp muddy trails led up from the tide-line pools, as if a myriad of tiny sea creatures had migrated inland. He walked across the rocks, following them. Almost a hundred yards inland, amid the higher rocks, thousands of shell-fish moved awkwardly, making slow and infinitely painful progress.

" See what I mean ?" Chris Winnett asked behind him. " *That's* never happened in the two years I've been studying this coast !"

Joe nibbled his lower lip, bending so that blonde hair fell over his eyes. Many of the migrating hundreds within his field of view slipped, almost surmounting a rock only to fall back. But each tried again, repeatedly, driven as by some inner compulsion. He straightened.

" Ever seen them move to avoid high tides ?"

" No," Winnett stated factually, " never. We've had pretty high water, as you know—twenty or thirty feet or more, but they've never budged. If they haven't shifted in two years, why now ?"

There was no answer and Joe was silent. He doubted if the shell-fish averaged more than two or three yards an hour, and ahead was steeply rising, broken rock. The instinct driving them was strong.

" Has there been any report of bad weather posted ?" he asked.

Chris Winnett shook his head with melancholic certainty. " I checked that first." He turned back towards the jetty.

Joe saw him go from view with his specimens, and stepped down into one of the moored power barges. Wide, flat and long, they had transported many tons of equipment out to the tidal float. He cast off. started the powerful engine, and took the barge out into the swell. The sky was reminiscent of a calm spring day on Earth, he thought, momentarily nostalgic. Storms looked impossibly unlikely.

The tidal-power raft lay like a half-submerged dry-dock, so wide and long that the in-running seas did not move her. Joe took the barge alongside, threw the loop over a mooring bollard, and stepped aboard. The deck felt firm as solid rock under his feet.

The man he had left in charge had the hard, lean look of a seaman. Joe felt confidence in him. Sorrell was to be trusted ; had, indeed, scarcely been ashore in six months. The raft was his ship ; he its skipper.

He nodded at Joe's question. " Never had less trouble. Since you phoned from shore and I opened the sluices last night I haven't done a thing."

The thought brought a smile to his weathered face. Joe walked a little way along the edge of the raft, inside the guard rail. A hundred yards long by thirty wide, she floated a bare six feet above water. Only

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in her centre did a metal cabin interrupt the steel deck, giving access to the levels below.

He eyed the waves rolling almost to his feet. Lower, inside, was the murmur of turbines.

"Like to ride out a storm in her, Captain?" he asked.

Sorrell laughed briefly. "Nothing easier, Mr. Baring! She'd take it like an iceberg—come to think of it, she's at least ninety percent submerged. When we go below and close the hatch, the weather doesn't matter."

At regular intervals massive cables stretched from the raft to shore. Seaward, others descended obliquely to immovable anchors moored to the sea bed. The immense strength of the whole project was comforting, Joe felt. From early beginnings, the colony was becoming self-sufficient. No ferry from Earth had landed for over a month, and none was due for three months longer. That meant isolation, Joe thought, but it also developed self-reliance.

He did not descend into the mighty hull of the raft, almost a floating counterpart of the building ashore. Instead, he returned to the powerful barge and took her back across the gently-moving sea that was to lend its power to a thousand useful purposes.

Chris Winnett stood near the end of the jetty, lean as a pole and with waves running to his feet. He walked beside the power barge as it lost way.

"What kind of tides would you expect on a planet with nine moons, Mr. Baring?"

Joe pulled the mooring rope tight. "Something pretty irregular, I suppose."

"Only *irregular*?"

Joe jerked the knot tight and straightened, wondering at the tone. "What do you mean?"

"Back on Earth there is Sol and one moon. The sea tries to follow the gravitational pull of both, piling up against any land mass in the way. When sun and moon are in line the pull is added, and we get high tides." He jerked a pointed finger at the sky. "We've nine moons here, each on its own orbital period, not to speak of Regulus Major. Scatter nine moons round a planet, and you get what we've so far experienced." He paused, gaze on the sea. "Bring those nine moons roughly into line—and you expect such an almighty lifting of the waters as to make Earth's highest Spring tides look nothing!"

The unease Joe had first felt on the rocks returned with a jab almost of physical impact. "There's been no exceptional tide in two years!"

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"Perhaps two years aren't long enough. Nine moons give a complex pattern. Maybe two hundred years, or two thousand, wouldn't be too long to wait for a certain combination."

Joe thought of the immense strength of the tidal raft. "Could be. So what?"

Winnett shrugged. "Don't ask me, Mr. Baring, but I'd like to work on it."

Joe went pensively to the office portion of the main building and found Veronica Linwood engaged upon the phonetic transcription of the Regulian tongue, almost her only work for two years. Still oddly girlish, he nevertheless knew she had a fully developed, mature understanding. He sat on the corner of the desk, swinging a long leg.

"You talk with the locals best. I want to find out what they know about tides here."

She looked up at him, oval face pillowed in palms. "I thought Chris Winnett had worked out a schedule."

"He has, but thinks it varies. He's got a scare that nine moons make things difficult. If so, the natives should know."

She closed the folder, put it in the desk, and rose. "What makes you suppose their reserve, indifference and hostility will be less now than previously?"

Silent because it was only hope, he led the way out. The building, a concrete aggregate of crushed rock, stood fairly high upon the coast. Inland, the rocky outcrop was lost amid the fresh green of bushes. Two jeeps appeared from the lower ground near the estuary, one driven by Spenser, the second, mud-caked, by Linwood.

"We'll ride," Joe suggested.

Spenser left the jeep and Joe took it down into a gap in the bushes. A crude road, cleared for transport from the rocket landing site nearly two miles inland, ran almost straight as a line across the undulating ground.

"Funny there's no species of *big* vegetation," Veronica Linwood said as the brushland closed round them.

Trails crossed the road at intervals, original native paths through which the bulldozers had cut at right angles. When the bush began to thin, allowing a glimpse of the plain where the Earth transports landed, Joe saw roofs to his left. He stopped the bouncing jeep and got down.

A path led to a clearing, occupied by a score of dwellings of artistic appearance and excellent construction. Regulians who saw the newcomers made no sign. All had sleek hair, extending like black silk down the back, meeting woven fibre garments. Their skin was humanly

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pink, detracting from a certain odd resemblance to seals walking erect. Outside a large house one sat twirling a spin-wheel drill between the opposing pairs of three fingers of one hand.

" We wish to speak with you," Joe said, halting.

The other looked up, his expression that of a sage disturbed by an urchin, then returned his gaze to the carving upon which the drill worked. Joe frowned slightly, irritated.

" We wish you well, and have never harmed any of you," he pointed out.

The Regulian lifted eyes oddly human except for the long, golden lashes. " Your coming was not desired, and has not increased our happiness or prosperity, Earthman," he said. The voice had melody, but the assurance of a stated fact. " We would prefer you all leave."

Their indifference was becoming enmity, Joe thought. If that grew into active hostility, it would be grave.

Joe sighed. " Try to tell them what I mean, Veronica," he suggested. " You do it better."

As she talked he watched the Regulian for any symptom of friendship. The drill whirled between the six sensitive fingers, and particles flew. The delicacy and power of the wide, strong hands fascinated Joe. Alert as a man's, yet wide as a seal's flippers. When a Regulian swam, it was with an accustomed ease no human could ever equal.

The native only looked up when the girl ceased. " Your presence is not necessary here."

Hot annoyance burned Joe's neck. The words were a dismissal of even the need for contact between Regulian and Earthman. He stifled his anger.

" Ask him about the tides !"

Veronica's fluent diction began again. He followed most of it, and admitted she put things well.

When she had finished the native placed aside his tool. " The affairs of our world need not be your concern."

He disappeared into the house, back hairs glistening with the movement, and Veronica made a helpless gesture.

" Near as telling us to clear out as doesn't matter !" she said. "Anything we find out won't be with their help !"

Joe grunted, returned to the jeep, and started it with a jerk that bounced them on the seat. He wondered what Harvey would do.

Ahead beyond the opening bushes was the wide, stony plain where the Earthships landed. Its emptiness emphasised their remoteness and need to rely on self. Little animals moved on the near edge of the vast clearing. Sand-rabbits, Joe had christened them, because of

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their size and sandy hue. But he had never seen so many above ground. As he watched, a queer knot of terror grew in his mind. All were on the move in one direction. Here was no play or mere grazing, but a mass migration!

He looked at Veronica Linwood and saw her face was white. Her gaze followed the rodents; some left their holes hesitantly, but joined the others that dotted the plain far as he could see, until lost to sight.

"Instinct!" she breathed. "Like the shell-fish!"

"Winnett told you about them?" Tension made his voice hard.

"He's told everyone."

A score of sand-rabbits passed near, hopping in a group, ears down. An urgency marked their movements, and some common impulse gave all a uniform direction. Veronica stood on the seat.

"I once saw lemmings on the move. It was like this."

She sat down and Joe started the vehicle abruptly and turned for the roadway. His throat felt dry, his muscles tensed. The plain was probably on an average 200ft. above sea level, he thought, astonished. Impossible that some instinctive fear of a high tide drive the rodents away!

They did not speak until the jeep emerged by the generating plant building. There, he got out stiffly.

"I want to talk to Chris Winnett!"

Winnett's room was long, narrow, and filled with the equipment required by his specialised work. Drag and drift nets, deep-sea sampling bottles, floats, lines, aquaria and cages occupied all the walls and much of the floor. Joe would be among the first to admit Winnett's usefulness—a large proportion of their food came from ocean and shore. Notebooks and charts before him, Winnett sat at a stained table fixed under the window, his expression one of abiding sorrow.

Joe halted behind him and looked down at the charts. Each showed the position of one moon, with distances, calculated mass, and orbital period.

"We really need a computer, Mr. Baring." Chris Winnett tapped the charts. "The total mass of all nine moons nearly equals that of Regulus I. If they're the debris of a companion, she was almost as large as this planet. Each moon is influenced by the other eight, and that makes calculation damned difficult."

It would be, Joe thought, with nine simultaneously inter-acting variables, not counting Regulus Major herself. He nodded.

"What do you make of it, near as you can get?"

"The satellites range in distance from a midget at 73,000 miles, circling us in just over six days, to a giant at 600,000 miles, with a

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79 day orbit. The other seven moons are scattered between that, not all on the same plane, and vary in mass and period. At any one time there's usually a conflict of gravitational pull, the main tidal motion being from a co-incidence in position of any two moons, helped by Regulus Major." Winnett drew a sheet out from under the others. "With patience, it's possible to get an idea of the situation at any time."

Joe took up the charts. There was the small moon at 73,000 miles, and one almost equally sized at 150,000. Beyond that were two rotating about themselves, and circling the planet at 250,000 miles, with a 28 day period—and probably responsible for a good deal of tidal movement, Joe thought. Beyond were three minute satellites which he mentally classified as little more than asteroids, a smallish moon with 60 day period and distance of 500,000 miles, then the giant at 600,000 miles.

"The perturbation of orbits is considerable at times," Winnett said. "The outermost moons are pretty close as regards distance from us, but have somewhat elliptical orbits off-set by nearly twenty degrees. The only moons to get caught up by each other's gravity is the pair at about Lunar distance." He fingered notes. "The highest tide we ever had, over ten months ago, was from that pair being in line with the small moon at 150,000 miles, with Regulus Major contributing."

"I see." Joe replaced the sheets. "And what's the worst we can look forward to?"

"This."

Winnett spread out the diagram he had withdrawn from under the others. It showed all the moons, and Joe felt almost physical shock. The three asteroids and 28-day pair were in line, with the three most remote moons only a little behind, and the midget at 73,000 miles speeding in its six day orbit to catch up. Winnett's finger moved to the paper edge and Joe saw Regulus Major on a dead straight line from planet to the three asteroids.

"This happens about once in 3,000 years," Winnett said.

His voice had a hard note. Joe licked his lips, eyes rivetted on the diagram. "You haven't made a mistake?"

"Not that I can find."

"How long until the tide begins to run here?"

Winnett looked at the clock. "About twelve hours, near as I can calculate."

Twelve hours, Joe thought. Only that long. Twelve hours to make secure two years work! He grunted, releasing pent breath.

"How high will it be?"

"Can't say. Pretty high!"

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He leaned back and Joe saw for the first time the expression on his face. Winnett looked older. Tired eyes and lined face told of long concentration on the complex pull of the planet's satellites. Joe pressed his shoulder momentarily.

"We'll do what we can!"

Joe left him, and warned Sorrell. The hard raft-boss seemed wholly confident. His voice on the phone lacked any uncertainty.

"We'll ride it out, Mr. Baring! High tides don't worry me—we're built to stand 'em!"

Joe wished he felt similar confidence. From the office window the sea lay calm and low—too low, he thought. The waters were piling up east, and would roll back as Regulus I rotated. A great strip of

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mud and silt was already exposed, revealed by an ocean movement more vast than any in the previous two years. He rang off, stood at the window chewing his lower lip, and slowly his brows drew down. Some inner instinct had driven the conical shell-fish from the beach—and the sand-rabbits from the landing field, two-hundred feet above sea level! His lips compressed and he jerked up the phone again.

"I'm having extra lengths of mooring cable brought out, Captain Sorrell!"

"But we're equipped for a 75ft. tide rise!"

Sorrell sounded astonished. More rise than ever expected, Joe agreed. But creatures with instincts trained by the absolute necessity of survival were often right!

"Nevertheless, I'm sending it! I want it spliced on the end of the cables already fitted, so that you can unwind to compensate for a greater rise if necessary! I'll send men out."

Within the hour things were beginning to move. Reels of spare cable were brought out, rolled to the power barges, and taken to the raft. The sea moved back to normal level, and seemed to pause, waves from a light breeze licking the jetty. Much had already been done when Veronica Linwood sought Joe out.

"I've been on the landing site watching."

He saw a twitch about her firmly-set lips. "Yes?"

"There's not a sand-rabbit left, either there or on the low hills beyond!"

Chris Winnett came round the building from the office block. "Creatures' instincts are hard to explain. I spent five years on eel migration as a student." His expression said five years had been too short a period. "The shell-fish and sand-rabbits *know*, that's all."

Joe felt part of his mind rebel. "The landing site is *high*! We can't have a tide to swamp that—"

Winnett's expression silenced him. "I'm not saying we can't," Winnett stated. "I don't know just what we should expect—but this tide will astonish even Sorrell!"

He went on, shoulders hunched. Silence came, backed by the murmur of the sea. The girl watched until Winnett was gone, then her gaze reverted to Joe.

"What about the Regulians?"

Joe realised this more immediate, personal danger had driven them from mind. Haughty, even insulting, they nevertheless deserved a warning, if only because silence would be inhuman.

"If you'll come with me to talk, we'll go warn them," he decided. "We've a couple of hours. I'd like to be back here before the tide begins!"

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Indigenous life was unlucky in this area, Joe thought as he drove. North and south were other land-masses with at least some fairly high points, but that was not so in the neighbourhood of the tidel station. After full investigation they had chosen the locality because tides were less good towards the higher and lower latitudes, dwindling to insignificance at the poles. In more equatorial regions the tide would be at maximum, and nowhere within hundreds of miles was any significant mountain range, even if time existed to move the natives there.

" If such a tide sweeps most of the equatorial and temperate regions once every three thousand years, that would account for the lack of large forests," Veronica Linwood said, watching the bush bump past. " Big trees couldn't survive. Everything left is attuned to periodic swamping."

When Joe halted the jeep silence filled the bush, oddly complete. They followed the path to the village. The dwellings stood unoccupied, and nowhere sounded any voice or activity.

" All gone ! " Joe said uneasily.

A trail led out of the village opposite the way they had entered. No bushman's trained eye was necessary to see that many feet had gone that way. Joe wondered why—no high ground was to be found there. only the coast, sea, and a few scattered islands never investigated in detail.

" We'll follow in the jeep," he decided. " There's no time for ceremony."

He drove through the silent village and along the trail which wound through the scrub, descending slowly towards the coast several miles distant. Soon the stunted trees and bush ceased, giving an extended view. Far to his left was the high ground beyond which lay the tidal station. Ahead, two islands stood perhaps a mile and a half from shore. Like carved, painted toys, native boats were being paddled from shore to the more distant island, bush-covered, quite large in area, but low.

" They're bent on suicide ! " Joe said bitterly.

He took the jeep bumping down the slope. A group of Regulians stood on the shore, waiting transport, and a tall native with dyed fibre habit turned and regarded the vehicle with unfriendly eyes. Joe almost pushed Veronica from the jeep.

" Tell them they'll be safer with us, or on high ground ! "

She jumped out, and a flood of Regulian commenced. Joe stopped the engine, leaning over to listen, but finding it difficult to follow. There was a pause.

" Tell him their boats are going to the lowest island ! " he snapped. " The other would be better !"

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Words passed. The Regulian said something abruptly, turned on a heel, and stalked back to the sea's edge, where empty canoes were loading. The girl made a gesture of helplessness. Joe felt irritation —this near insanity on the part of the natives was serious, and Harvey would doubtless say they should have been protected!

"What did he say?" he demanded.

"Briefly, that we could go to hell, and that they are going to the haven mentioned in the legends of their forefathers."

Joe swore, eyes on the long, low island. "Group suicide if ever I saw it! Didn't you point out they might be safe with us?"

"I did." She watched the carved canoes push off. "He said the Earthmen's constructions were but as worm casts on the shore, or words to that effect."

Joe grunted, his reply unspoken. A rustling had begun in the low bush behind the jeep, and scores of sand-rabbits emerged, hopping quickly. As he stared in amazement they swept down the shore and into the sea, swimming strongly, tiny bodies bobbing in the waves. Others came, ignoring the vehicle, streaming into the water. Like lemmings indeed, he thought—bent on suicide!

The girl shaded her eyes, staring at the island. Joe took binoculars from the jeep and watched. Within half an hour the sand-rabbits, just visible, were passing the nearer, highest island, and fighting the incoming tide in their efforts to gain land where the canoes were now moored. He studied the long, low island from end to end. At no point did it rise to any great height, and it seemed almost covered with low scrub. A forty-foot rise in ocean level would undoubtedly swamp the lot.

"Perhaps it was once higher, even part of the mainland," Veronica Linwood suggested. "Instincts are blind and tend to fail when circumstances change."

The last native had gone, the last canoe was tied by its companions. Joe mopped his brow, started the jeep, and set it bumping back along the trail. Group suicide was catching, he thought. Every living thing on the island would undoubtedly drown long before high tide!

Waves were running high up the jetty, the hissing foam cold and silvery in the early dawn light. The hours of darkness had been few, but seemed long. Working by floodlight, Joe had everything portable made secure. The jeeps were brought close against the landward side of the generating plant building, and men waited in the power barges, ready to take them out into the safety of deep water.

Joe's gaze seldom strayed from the rising sea. Mist and low cloud met the grey horizon, which seemed to be creeping heavenwards to

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touch the sky. The light breeze brought a dull, heavy murmuring that told of the mighty ocean movement already inundating or aying bare half the seashores of the planet. When no further action to secure personal safety was possible, Joe's mind returned to the Regulians, and the hopeless refuge they had chosen. He found Winnett talking with Veronica Linwood, and told them of his doubts.

"Why not take one of the power barges and see if the high water has given them sense?" Winnett suggested.

A good plan, Joe thought. They boarded, and he sent the craft out into the waves, now running strongly and making a background of low thunder against the coast. Spray struck the edge of the vessel and splashed the deck.

"We might still ferry them off!" he said, staring ahead for a first glimpse of the islands.

"Assuming they agree!"

The girl sounded doubtful, but Joe felt the desire for life must at last force the natives to accept help. The power station and tidal raft drifted behind and the barge rose strongly to heavy seas. Beyond the estuary mouth, the coastline grew abruptly from the submerged strand only visible at low water, and a dull, continuous roar told of the rising ocean.

A brisk wind whipped mist from the wave tops, and the islands dawned through it. Joe studied them, brows drawn down. The higher island was still deserted; on the nearest edge of the other, many natives had camped amid the brush, their canoes drawn up out of the sea.

"When the tide's highest, there won't be even a top twig showing!" Chris Winnett stated. Feet set squarely apart, he swayed as a wave ran obliquely past. "They've made the damndest mistake this time, Mr. Baring!"

Joe slowed the barge and took it in a curve to the beach. As she bumped gently he motioned Winnett to the shielded wheel. "Keep the boat here, Chris!"

He sprang ashore, feet sinking ankle deep into a springy mass of roots and fibre. The bushes extended within a few yards of him, and several Regulians stood watching coldly.

"You'll drown here!" His breathing was heavy, but he knew they understood.

None of the natives moved. Joe felt anger, but fought it down. A light touch on his arm showed the girl had followed. He grunted, compressing his lips.

"Tell the silly idiots the high tide's only just beginning, but that we can take them off!"

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Her Regulian was fluent, and sounded convincing even to Joe. When it had ended the nearest native shot back a rapid, acid phrase, then all turned and stalked into the bush. Veronica gestured helplessly.

"He says they stay on the refuge of their forefathers!"

Joe's impatience boiled over. "We can't drag the lot away by force! Let's go back!"

He stamped through the carpet of roots, soggy already and drenched with each breaker. Again on the power barge, he swore with feeling. Apparently a Regulian would rather die than accept an Earthman's help!

Only when they were half a mile away did he look back. "Heard anything about this island before?"

Chris Winnett shook his head. "It's a dot on our map, but of no importance, and never studied or investigated."

Veronica Linwood came into the shelter of the wheel shield. "They've never hinted it was specially important," she said. "Not that they give confidences. Don't see why they should choose that island in preference to any of the score along the coast."

A high sea ran over the flush deck and waves flowed by Joe's feet. No one could do more, he thought. The Regulians wouldn't come. He set his back to the island, and kept the blunt nose of the barge nearly square with the running sea.

A great atmospheric movement appeared to be following the rising waters, and wind spattered every wave top like rain across the deck. Never had Joe seen waves so high up the pier. Rocks, sand and shingle were gone, replaced by heaving brown.

"Another few hours will give us an idea of what to expect!" Winnett announced miserably.

The unease and helplessness Joe felt grew as time passed. Never would the inundation of mighty waters cease, he thought with despair. Waves rolled and thundered until the pier was covered. Salt rain sped on the gale. Numbed by sound, shaken by the heaving barge, reality became a nightmare with no refuge. Water flowed round the transformer building, half way up the doors. Short of fleeing to the rocket landing field, or watching from an upper window, there was no option to remaining aboard a barge in deep water. Only once did Joe risk approaching the building. A sudden wave could have been disastrous and he did not try again.

To gain the tidal raft, or another barge, was like trying to exchange boats in a mid-ocean gale. The raft was riding it out, waves sluicing across her. Sealed down, she was virtually air-tight. Other power

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barges faced the tide. Once one bearing Linwood and the young mechanic drew near, dancing on the frantic sea, and Linwood gesticulated wildly. Joe could make nothing of his actions, or hear Spenser's voice above the slap and smash of the waves.

Hours had passed when Joe realised the water was no longer creeping up the power-station building, now two storeys submerged. As the tide ceased to flow, the wind dropped, leaving them on a heavy swell of conflicting currents. Veronica and Winnett had been in the storage hold. A weatherproof hatch opened, and Winnett's long face came into view. He looked about, flung back the trap with a clang, and emerged to the deck.

His gaze passed to the building. "That was high this time!"

Joe's nerves jerked. "*This time*?"

The sad eyes returned from the ebb surging round the walls. "High tides don't happen only one day, Mr. Baring. From my calculations tomorrow will be worse. After that, our little neighbour with the six day orbit gets out of line, as do the pair."

He stared at the heavens, hidden by cloud. Joe felt his strength had abruptly gone—*worse* . . . !

"How bad will it be, Chris?" he asked, dry lipped.

Winnett looked down at the washed deck. "Can't say—only guess."

"And your guess?"

"It'll be pretty bad. I've been figuring, below." Winnett released his breath in an uneven sigh. "All considered, I'd say the sand-rabbits didn't leave the plateau for nothing."

"But that's two-hundred feet!"

Winnett nodded. "Tides are difficult to figure, because the wind helps. Fifty feet is possible on Earth." His expression was revealing. "A total rise of three to four-hundred feet is easily feasible here, with the gravity pull we've got."

Joe read the truth on his face. Winnett had studied marine life. Often morose, he never exaggerated. Winnett's figures were not guess-work, but calculation based on knowledge.

That high, Joe thought. Over the plain, over the power-house, over any land within hundreds of miles! Then three thousand years of peace—if anything of intruding Humanity remained to see it!

Night drifted over the sea, then over glistening mud, and a dark sea bed never before exposed. No moon hung in the sky, and only starlight of an indescribable dimness filtered through the clouds above. The tidal raft lay tilted, deck sloping, giant orifices in her sides revealed. Mooring cables lay slack to huge anchors secured to the dry sea bed, and the conductors from shore to raft draped like wet string across

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naked rocks. The barges lay on the mud beside the jetty, and for the first time in two years Joe could hear no sound. So remote were the ebbing waters that no murmur showed where they were piled.

Footsteps came along the jetty, and a dark, youthful form dawned out of the gloom. Short hair awry, he halted.

"It'll be worse tomorrow, Joe!"

Joe studied the other, a few inches shorter, slighter, and unhardened by life.

"So Chris Winnett says, Philip." He wished the lad had some of the tough determination of his sister.

"If it's high as he says, what'll we do?"

Panic edge the voice and Joe wished there was some assuring reply. No land within reach would be safe; submerged, too, would be every level of the power house. The barges might live—unless carried by the tide to shallow water and shattered.

"It may be safest on the raft." Joe gazed at the silent shape now isolated beyond mud, rock, and pools. "We'll board her early."

"You know there's not enough anchor cable if the tide's as high as he says!" Linwood objected, tone disturbed.

Yes, he knew, Joe thought. They must hope Chris was wrong. He pressed the other's slender shoulder, hoping his voice sounded confident: "We don't bother about things like that when we can't do anything about them!"

"If the cables were cut she'd float through anything, Joe!"

Panic, more obvious. "We're not cutting them," Joe said. Freed, cast ashore, the mighty labour would all be lost . . . "Go and try to sleep."

It was much later when Joe himself went up to the transformer building to take a brief rest. Still no moon lit the way—the first night he had ever seen without at least two moons in the sky, he thought bitterly. Just before going in he halted, listening. The ocean was so silent all her water might have vanished.

Joe did not realise he had slept until the heavy murmur of flowing tide crept into his ears, jarring him into awareness. He rose, rubbing tired eyes, and sought a window. Brown seas were rolling landward in the dawn light, and already the tidal raft was half submerged.

Strain was visible on the faces of the men as they prepared to ferry across to the raft. The sea was rising quickly, rollers sweeping higher over the sea bed, breaking in low thunder and boiling white foam amid the rocks. Soon water flowed round the jetty and the barges lifted, dancing ponderously to the swell.

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"It's rising twice as fast as yesterday," Chris Winnett said as he waited his turn to jump aboard.

Joe thought that Linwood was exceptionally pale, and quick terror shone in his eyes whenever they turned upon the in-rolling waters. A single barge could easily have carried them all, but Joe thought it best that his companions and the fifteen skilled workmen who had accomplished so much should split among the four craft. Within the hour the great generating-plant hulk was afloat, and everyone aboard her, the barges trailing on lines a safe distance to leeward.

Captain Sorrell's lean face was expressionless as teak. Only as they descended into the hull did Joe catch unease in his eyes.

"What happens if the tide rise exceeds our cables?" Sorrell asked quietly.

Joe felt there was no answer. "We'll see."

A single generator hummed low in the body of the raft, just audible above the murmuring sea. Other sluices stood idle and open, offering least resistance to the tidal current. In the automatic control room the echo-sounding equipment beeped rhythmically, operating circuits that controlled the four great electrical winches from whose drums the anchorage cables descended. Indicators showed all were slowly unwinding, to compensate for the increasing depth of water below.

The gleaming metal bulkheads, stout and numerous, and with an atmosphere of extreme strength, made Joe feel more confident. A slow swinging movement had begun, and he went back on deck.

Waves already lapped round the base of the shore building, and long, deep rollers were sweeping in across the rising sea, striking the tidal raft obliquely and breaking in creamy foam over her. Froth ran round his feet, ankle deep, and spray struck his cheeks, carried on wind that followed the tide. Some of the men waited near the hatch; others were below.

Little by little the lower part of the building ashore sank from view, rising breakers creeping up the mottled walls. A powerful swell with strong undercurrent was flooding inland. The brushwood beyond the building vanished, submerged, and a debris of leaves, twigs and uprooted rubbish began to pass on the sea, telling of other land-areas already covered by the deluge.

Joe went below and met Sorrell coming to find him. The Captain's face had aged. He indicated a corridor and narrow stair. Joe descended and found himself in one of the winch rooms. Sorrell closed the door.

"We'll soon be at the limit of our cable, Mr. Baring."

The great winch was running, hesitating, then running again, responding to impulses from the echo-sounder. The drum was always

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unwinding, the great cable always paying out through the armoured, sealed duct. Most of the cable had gone, and one end of the threaded cylinder already stood naked.

"Another ten fathoms will see us finished," Sorrell stated.

A magnetic brake clicked; gears spun and more wire rope vanished. Joe watched it go.

"You spliced on the extra lengths?"

"Every bit. The drums couldn't hold more if we'd had it."

More cable, thick as a man's wrist, sped from the drum. The winding indicator showed under ten fathoms remained. Joe's gaze went from the dial to the other's lined face.

"How long will it last?"

Sorrell chewed his lower lip momentarily. "Twenty to thirty minutes, at this rate, Mr. Baring."

So short a time, Joe thought. So great a sea had never been imagined, and was consequently not provided for by the cable winches. He left the winding room, found Chris Winnett, and took him aside.

"How long before high tide?"

Winnett studied his watch, calculating. "We're not half way there yet!"

"It'll rise as fast?" Joe felt aghast.

"Yes, until near maximum high-water. The figures I gave you yesterday may be exceeded."

"I see." There was insufficient cable. No one had allowed for a tidal complex arising once in three thousand years! Joe hesitated, seeking inspiration and decision out of his conflict and dismay. "Get everyone on deck!"

When he went up all were standing compactly round the hatch, surf swilling over their feet. He explained tersely that the cable was nearly all paid out, but high tide by no means reached. The men looked uneasy, but were silent. Only Philip Linwood's face showed panic. He held Joe's arm, fingers biting.

"You'll cut the cables, Joe!"

"And lose two years' work? Never!" Joe pulled himseld free. Unthinkable that the huge tidal raft be cast up helplessly on the shore! She would be useless, immovable—a vast relic token of his folly.

"But we'd be safe aboard, Joe!" Linwood urged. Spray dashed his face and unruly hair clung to his wet forehead. "She'd never sink!"

Joe silenced him harshly, not listening. "We take to the barges! The raft stays here—moored to her cables! She may survive." His gaze sped over them. "Anyone want to stay?"

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A man moved uneasily. "A hundred feet under water, moored to the sea-bed? Not likely!"

"Then draw the barges in and divide among them!" Joe ordered.

All but one were loaded before he realised Linwood had disappeared. Winnett was holding the last barge as near as he dared, its rope looped round a bollard.

"Wait!" Joe roared, and descended three rounds at a time into the comparative stillness no longer a feasible refuge.

Lights burned in the corridors and control room, but all were empty. The thunder of breakers was dull and remote, the tidal plant so massive that she barely moved to the swelling flood. Emotion akin to panic began to spread through Joe's nerves. Philip wasn't tough enough, he thought as he ran.

The first winch room was empty, with barely two turns of cable left on its drum. Even as he stared in, the magnetic release slammed open and more hawser, taut as a steel rod, was paid out. In the second winch chamber a metal pick with razor-sharp edge lay, and a hot, scorching smell struck Joe's nostrils. The great cable was cut. Water spilled through the empty exit orifice where the gland had nothing upon which to close, and when the drum turned it was to unwind a stunted end of cable, discoloured and steaming.

Swearing, Joe ran for the next winch. The door was open, ruby and blue playing into the corridor. Shirt blackened, face running sweat, Linwood was directing the jet of a portable welder upon the taut cable. It was red hot, hissing, and Joe flung himself at Linwood's waist. The torch flew in an arc. Red-hot outer wires began to give, crackling, then with a twang the inner strands parted. The broken cable lashed from the exit orifice, whipping past Joe's head like a snake.

"You young fool!" Joe realised he was pounding Linwood's head, and stopped, jerking him upright by the collar. Upon these four hawsers depended a billion pounds' worth of equipment.

Linwood was terrified, almost sobbing. "We'll be drown in the boats, Joe! The raft will float through anything if she's free!"

Joe did not trust himself to reply. He kicked shut the torch valve, shoved Linwood into the corridor, and slammed the door. Holding him, he marched to the remaining winch room. The cable was taut with stress, the drum fully unwound and locked. The sight turned Linwood's legs to jelly.

"We'll be dragged down! The sea will be over us—"

"No bloody thanks to you if it is!" Joe snarled.

He half pushed, half carried Linwood up to the hatchroom. Brown water was draining in, growing to a thick torrent as a wave passed over. Gasping, Joe forced Linwood up ahead of him, emerged and slammed

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down the hatch. A wave ran across the deck, knee-high. The raft was pitching, buoyancy trying to keep her afloat, but the anchoring cables holding her down. Already she was awash, seeming to sink as the water rose.

A rope sang through the air and struck Joe's chest. He clung to it, one arm round Linwood. The next wave took him off his feet, but someone was pulling. Amid choking brown water he emerged again into air and found Winnett heaving him into the barge. Spluttering, Joe stood up, letting his breath return.

The motor began to hum, and a wake appeared behind the craft. Looking back, Joe saw a great rectangle of relatively calm water marked the spot where the tidal raft lay. *Two cables*, he thought. To leave the raft moored was the only way of saving her. Would two cables be enough?

"We thought you were finished," Winnett said. His gaze passed over the ocean. "It's growing rough."

Slowly the area of calm water grew less obvious. Joe wondered whether the great hull, with all its equipment, was sinking. The exit trap had not been secured, but water pressure should hold it shut. Again, the flush deck had been to run off spray and rain, and might not withstand such stresses. When he looked landward he was shocked to note that no part of the plant building remained visible. Nothing indicated they were within a mile of the jetty. Instead, waves ran on over the shore and slopes beyond, forming moving brown billows as far as he could see. Winnett was keeping the blunt bow to the tide, but water splashed aboard with every wave. A hundred yards away the other barges were bobbing to each heightening breaker, white spume flying in the wind.

Standing behind the wind shield, Joe wondered whether anything made by Man would remain when the flood receded. The fresh wind was developing into a gale, driving waves across the heaving ocean, and the barge danced as if ready to up-end and sink. Clouds rode in, making the sky dark as evening, and rain came heavily on the increasing wind.

"Think we'll be swamped, Mr. Baring?" Winnett asked, swaying to the movement.

Waves ran over them shin deep. "The wind's bringing high seas!" Joe felt he dared not prophesy. If land were attainable, no man in his senses would be afloat. "If it gets worse we're finished!"

A squall lashed him. Linwood had crept below, but his sister stood close against the shield, buffetted but apparently unafraid. She saw his glance.

"What of the natives, Joe?"

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Wind whipped her voice away, almost unheard. He grimaced. All drowned, he supposed. As he opened his mouth to shout, a dull, heavy explosion shook the air, rumbled, then was lost in the thunder of running seas. Nothing showed its distance or cause, and the wind made its direction uncertain. The barge trembled, but whether from shock or heavy wave, Joe could not decide.

Veronica Linwood came nearer to him. "Instincts arise to preserve a species! Perhaps the Regulians know what they're doing after all!"

Joe shook his head. "It wasn't instinct took them to that island, but some out-dated legend!" He did not for an instant doubt that the island was totally submerged, every canoe carried away, swamped, and every Regulian dead.

A determined look shone in the girl's eyes. "Sand-rabbits don't have legends—I was thinking of them as well!"

"We could try," Winnett put in. "Keeping under way in that direction looks as safe as anything else—"

Joe followed his arm. The three other barges had spread out over half a mile of seething water, and would eventually reach the position of the islands, if not first swamped. He nodded.

"Keep going, then!"

Astonishment grew into disbelief as the last mile slid by and the pitching barge drew near the location of the two islands. The coast was hidden below running seas; the taller island was gone too—but the low, brush-covered refuge Joe had condemned so finally remained, in no way more submerged than formerly. He rubbed his eyes, but it was no hallucination. Central in a great expanse of almost placid water, the island remained, canoes moored, water lapping its rim, with a few thin trails of ascending smoke telling of camp fires.

"So their legend was sense," Veronica Linwood breathed.

Astounded still, Joe felt their pitching cease as the barge reached smooth water. Only slowly did understanding came to him. Some trick of currents and configuration of sea bed and shore combined to give an area free of waves. Debris floated by them, twirling slowly—uprooted trees, twigs and boughs, and a vast pulpy mass of leaves and vegetable matter, torn from other, remote lands, for all he knew. Here, the rubbish circled, a vast heap with the island at its centre.

The barges ploughed through the debris, slowed, and drifted to a halt. Joe stepped off on to the spring mass of roots and fibre. *Floating*, he thought. The whole island was a buoyant mass of rubbish from other great tides, held together by roots, bushes and grass, increasing in size as the currents brought new material. For hundreds of thousands of years the debris had accumulated supporting the vegetation whose roots bound the whole together.

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Far away in the bush voices sounded loudly, but did not approach. Joe caught a glimpse of a swarm of sand-rabbits, but they were nearly invisible among the multitude of brown stems and slender trunks.

"We are *moving*, you know," Chris Winnett said.

He pointed far away to their left, and Joe saw that a strong current seemed to move in that direction, drawing away the mass of uprooted rubbish. Two miles out, almost at the limit of visibility, the ocean surface appeared to dip, as if a fissure had opened in the sea bed.

Natives came through the bushes, halting as they saw the new arrivals. Speech fluttered among them, and one came forward.

"There is no refuge for you here, Earthmen."

Joe felt quick anger. "We'll do no harm!"

The Regulian regarded him aloofly. "Your presence or absence is a thing of no importance to us—it is not that, but the island is no longer safe. Go."

"Not safe?" Joe felt astonishment replace his anger.

"No." A lean arm lifted, pointing. "There came an explosion in the sea. The sea bed has opened, and the waters are falling through. Do you not see the current?"

Joe remembered the dull explosion, the concavity where waves and ocean appeared to melt from view. The dip was clearer now—and not so far. The enormous pressure of piling water had opened some fault in the strata of the ocean floor. Slowly yet relentlessly the floating island was being drawn from its backwater, out into the breakers, almost certainly to eventual destruction.

The Regulian's noble face was infinitely said. "Our race is ended, Earthman."

With his companions he moved back into the bush, where a low, tuneless wailing had commenced, setting an edge to Joe's nerves.

"It is their burial song," Veronica Linwood whispered.

The other barges emptied, men piling ashore, their feet sinking ankle deep in the mass of fibre and root tendrils. The depression in the ocean surface was nearer, and visible now as a vast whirlpool, spinning and sucking amid the boiling waves. Its approach was only apparent, Joe thought. The island was in fact drifting towards it, drawn with the loose rubbish.

"We'll never live out there," Chris Winnett declared morosely. "If the waves and current don't break this lot to bits it'll probably sink! It's about as buoyant as a soaked sponge, all told!"

For once Joe felt inclined to agree. At no point did the waterlogged mass rise high out of the sea. Its very size would be dangerous, once the rim of the giant whirlpool was reached. The island would break

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up. Already waves were striking over it with unusual force, tearing away the looser rubbish at its edge. The whole would undoubtedly be destroyed and sink.

Winnett looked at his watch. "It's an hour to high tide, six till the sea's down to normal."

Joe's gaze flickered again to the dip in the ocean. Perhaps a mile across, they were now almost at its rim, and it sloped more sharply to its centre. In some strange manner it smoothed the rolling waves, forming a spinning saucer amid the swell. From it his gaze travelled to the men, and the four power barges, and a dim hope sprang alive in his heart.

"Get in the boats and tow against the current!"

They stared at him, and Winnett's face was the first to show understanding. But the doubt returned. "This island is half a mile across."

"Don't talk," Joe snarled. "Try! If we fail we'll drown anyway!"

Running, he sprang into the nearest barge, uncoiling the lines used to moor it. They dragged the ropes through the bushes, fixing them at a score of points. First one, then two, then all four barges were throbbing, twin screws sending up a surging wash.

"The wind's with us!" Chris Winnett roared once.

Joe scarcely knew how long passed. A rope pulled free, dragging a mass of uprooted bushes and rubbish. He swam from barge to island, carrying back the line, and secured it again. A group of natives came into view, watched a moment, then disappeared among the brush. Within minutes they were back, bearing many plaited cords with which they lengthened the tow-rope and tied it to every bush and trunk.

Roaring motors thundered at the sky, whining at maximum power. Sometimes waves drenched them; sometimes a barge failed to rise to the incoming swell, and was momentarily half lost under brown water.

Only after an apparent infinity of time did Joe realise that the centre of the whirlpool was drifting slowly away. Wind and men combined had changed the drift to destruction into a slow movement towards safety.

After a time the tide began to ebb and the direction changed again. For an hour Joe thought all their effort was to be made vain, then all movement ceased and he knew the bast mass of the floating island had grounded.

He stopped the barges, and for a time they rested, moored close to the brush. Sorrell came squelching along, and boarded the craft at Joe's side.

"I want to be going back, Mr. Baring."

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Joe read emotion on his face. The lean raft-boss wished to see if the raft still floated. Joe felt his doubt and near despair, and put a hand momentarily on Sorrell's shoulder.

"There were only two cables, Captain." He turned away, sad. Better not to hope too much—disappointment would be the less.

The wind had almost gone, and the ebbing tide had settled down to a steady, strong current, making an oblique course necessary to compensate for drift. Joe watched the island drop from view behind, until it was a dim shape beyond the sea-mist, then lost to sight. The following day's tide would be relatively slight, and by then the subterranean cavities under the sea bed would probably be filled so that no dangerous current could arise.

Only slowly did the tidal raft come into sight, tilted, so that one end projected unusually, and the other was just submerged, but apparently intact and still afloat. Sorrell boarded immediately, descended from view, and soon returned. He waved, cupping his hands to bellow from the hatch.

"If I can have half a dozen men we can make all secure for tomorrow, Mr. Baring!"

Joe put them off, left one barge, and took the others back to the jetty, just emerging from the coursing ebb tide. The building stood unmoved, every window broken.

Inside, Joe decided he had never seen such disorder. Mud, leaves and broken rubbish lay everywhere; sodden debris half obstructed doors; water dribbled down walls, from ceilings, and trickled along corridors. The building had broken the force of the current, and no major equipment was disturbed. Most was sealed against damp and atmosphere, and impervious to immersion.

Joe decided the radio equipment must receive first attention. At dawn Harvey expected contact and a report. If not forthcoming, a major disaster would be assumed.

Only a few men were available, as it was imperative Sorrell lift and join the severed cables. Darkness had come and the sea was down to normal when the Captain reported all secure.

"We'd shipped a few thousand gallons of water," he said, the phone loud with his note of difficulties overcome. "But the pumps are clearing it. You can have current when you want it."

"We'll have it now," Joe said. "A gang is working all night on the radio installation."

"Certainly, Mr. Baring."

High on the floodlit roof the aerial elements were restored, jury-rigged against the time for proper repairs. Rubbish was shovelled

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unceremoniously from the broken windows, floors washed down, equipment tested and replaced. Dawn was lightening the sky when Spenser, muddy and round face grimed, reported that the radio was workable. Joe sought out Chris Winnett, and found him trying to set in order a confusion of traps, nets and other specialist apparatus. Tired, Joe sat on the metal bench.

"How much tide do we expect today, Chris?"

Winnett sucked his lower lip cogitatively. "Slightly less than the first day, I think—we may get a few feet round the building, nothing more."

"Nothing the tidal raft can't stand?"

"No," Winnett said with conviction. "She took the first day well enough."

Joe washed and had half an hour's rest. Within a few months everything would be back where it was, he thought morosely, flat on his back on his bunk. The plant would be restored, the three-day tidal deluge a thing of the past—the Regulians still as distant, if not openly hostile, and Harvey still yelling for friendly relations! No friendship with the natives, no Earth settlement. Ultimately, it was as simple as that, and as final.

Joe wondered what he should tell Harvey. A full report must wait. Meanwhile, he must confess complete failure in establishing friendship with the Regulians. "Without friendship, continued settlement will be impossible," Harvey had said. Joe sighed. Never before had such an enormous project been abandoned as useless.

A tap came on the door and a man looked in. "Half an hour until contact time, Mr. Baring."

"Thanks." Joe got up. Thirty minutes to find a good excuse, he thought. Harvey would not be satisfied with the mere statement that the Regulians did not want men's friendship.

On the way down he met Veronica Linwood. Excitement radiated from her steadfast eyes.

"A ceremonial canoe has just reached the jetty, Joe!"

Joe felt unimpressed. "I've Commander Harvey on schedule. Send 'em away—"

"But it's a red canoe!" Impatience made the eyes dance. "Red is their symbolic colour for peace and friendship!"

Joe snorted. "Impossible! Friendship is the last thing a Regulian has to give."

"*Perhaps not now*!"

Her tone shook him into silence. His gaze flickered to the corridor clock, back to her face, then he began to run, hearing her rapid footfalls behind him.

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The canoe was brilliant red, the natives in red jerkins and with red hats of various design topping their sleek hair. Conscious of his own personal dignity, the leader was ascending the jetty. He halted, and for the first time in his life Joe saw a Regulian smile.

"Our leaders have decided there shall be friendship and peace." The tone was grave, but not cold. "Your boats have saved us, when the refuge of our ancestors would have been lost." A graceful gesture took in the barges. "Your action was that of good men. You can show us many things. In return, we can help your people. There is no need for enmity, none for war—"

A shout interrupted the words. Spenser was at the corner of the building, waving.

"Mr. Baring—your contact!"

Joe turned to run, hesitated, looking back, and caught Veronica Linwood's gaze. "Thank them—explain to them—get them to wait."

He ran like a hare, panting, slammed into the radio room, and gained the stool as the panel light began to glow. Burblings changed to the hiss of static.

"Project Commander Harvey speaking."

Joe relaxed. "Joe Baring here. I had been waiting for you, Commander!"

"Everything is in order?" Harvey sounded annoyed at not having caught a subordinate behind schedule.

"Perfectly, Commander Harvey!" Joe permitted himself a weak smile. "We have had a little flooding, but you will be receiving a full report about that in due course. Meanwhile, I am happy to say we have now definitely set up friendly relationships with the natives—"

"Good!" Harvey's voice blurred behind static. "The Commission will be impressed, Mr. Baring, and will probably reward you—"

The fizzling whine began, and Joe knew contact was going. "Thank you, Mr. Harvey! A full record of all related circumstances will be reaching you—"

Amid burbling the light faded, and he sighed, wiping his face. Friendship meant peace; peace, successful colonisation. As he rose he met constant eyes regarding him from the doorway, and grinned crookedly.

"Will Harvey think I'm guilty of understatement, Veronica?"

The dark head shook. "If he agrees with me he'll think you are a miracle, Joe!"

Francis G. Rayer

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It is becoming evident that, contrary to popular and gloomy expectation, science-fiction is not yet defunct in this country. The trend towards keener selectivity by the publishers, and the taste and discernment of the comparative newcomers to their ranks (particularly Michael Joseph, Faber & Reinhardt) is rewarding in that the torrent of mediocrity in past years has, we hope, abated for good, while the less frequent appearances of better hard-cover science fiction, some of them worthwhile contributions to modern literature, marks a new era for the genre—which may yet deserve better than the cute Greek alphabet ratings of certain contemporary critical despatch.

Originality, too, is a welcome innovation where it concerns hitherto unpublished work by top American authors. Following the recent scoop with Bester's *Tiger, Tiger,* we are now given first sight of a new novel by one of America's major new writers, James Blish, whose **THEY SHALL HAVE STARS** (Faber & Faber, 12/6d) is in effect a preface to his recent *Earthman Come Home.* In that he used the idea of free-moving independent space-cities—the "spin-dizzies"—and now he goes back in time to the period immediately prior to Man's bursting out beyond the confines of the Solar System. Limited space travel is established and scientific research, under tight security in the Western world whose domination is in imminent decline, is concentrated on huge American projects like the stupendous "Bridge" on Jupiter. An awe-inspiring construction engineered by proxy from Jupiter's moons, it is accepted as an expensive arms research but is actually an experiment to prove the theory of a certain relation between magnetism and gravity which was to result in the spindizzy. This theme, and the discovery of anti-agathics (antibiotics against death-decay) are treated with immense realism—a considerable accomplishment in view of the highly imaginative concepts involved and the technicalities plausibly detailed. Blish is an author of great intelligence and ability and presents some thought-provoking ideas with a faultless literary style. Highly recommended.

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A British author who has improved considerably with his fourth published novel—logically enough for one whose talents in this field bear the hallmark of perseverance and hard work rather than natural brilliance—is Charles Eric Maine. The novel is **ESCAPEMENT** (Hodder & Stoughton, 12/6d) and it is heavily disguised science fiction for popular consumption—a good idea and it almost succeeds as good science fiction. As usual I found Maine's style to be an exasperating mixture of good, bad and indifferent, but with an indefinable attraction that holds the reader to find out how it all ends—something like experimenting with hashish. Lacking the wit of Shepherd Mead's *Big Ball of Wax*, he takes a similar idea—an extension of the electroencephalograph for playing back to audiences recordings of emotions—and by Chapter Six gets down to the basic plot gimmick which has been painfully obvious since the first few pages. In the meantime the story is being garnished with the old familiar stock thriller characters and outrageous cat-and-mouse situations. Unpleasant things happen to a hero who is already suffering from incurable insomnia (the results of this are ingeniously used for the story) and then, insidiously, interest takes hold and some novel ideas creep in—the Hollywood mogul's "unlife" philosophy, world domination via the "dream-palaces," the nine-year sleep—and the writing shows flashes of brilliance, the action improves and moves to an exciting climax. Maine is becoming increasingly skilled at his own type of writing, which I can only liken to Edgar Wallace with a flavour of science fiction, and, with one eye always on possible film rights, could go a long way to keeping Hollywood in full production with sub-standard epics right up to the time when they eventually *do* change over to canned dreams.

Devotees of the adventures of Captain Jet Morgan, through courtesy of author Charles Chilton and the B.B.C.'s steam-radio, can now have in book form the 20-part serial version broadcast last year, **THE RED PLANET** (Herbert Jenkins, 10/6d) being of course the sequel to the now famous *Journey Into Space*. Having managed to miss odd instalments myself, I never did fully understand what actually went on, but I remember thinking that the ambitious intricacies of the plot could be too heady for popular consumption. As before, Chilton makes interesting reading of the story of a Terran space-fleet heading for Mars, meeting with weird adventures and escaping to warn Earth of impending invasion, but I still could not stomach the dialogue. Although he hints finally at yet another sequel, nothing more has come over the air. Perhaps even Chilton has sickened at last of Lemmy and Jet?

Leslie Flood

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